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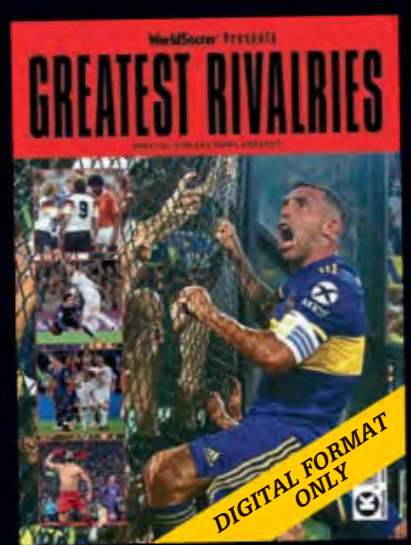

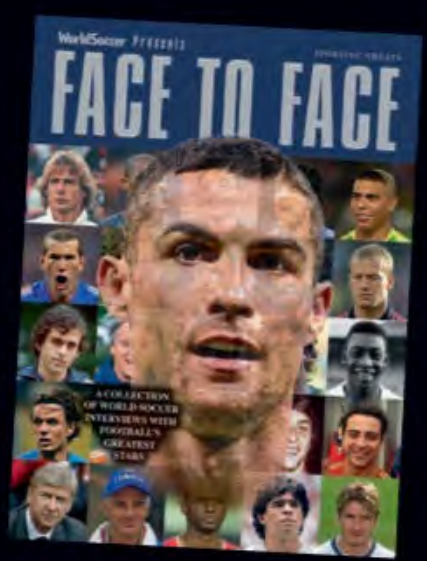

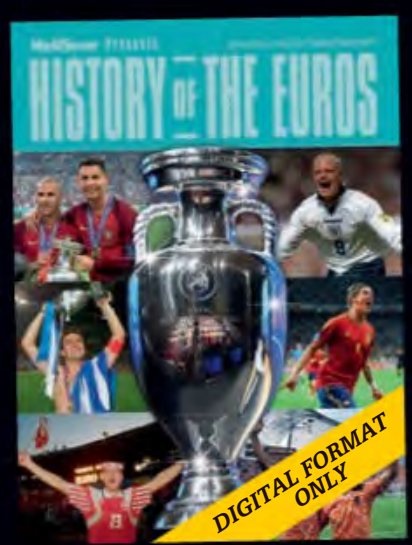

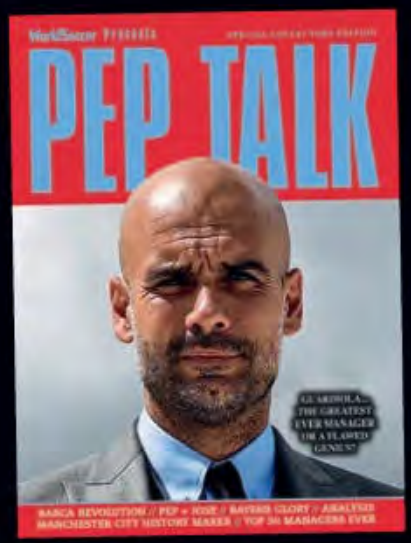

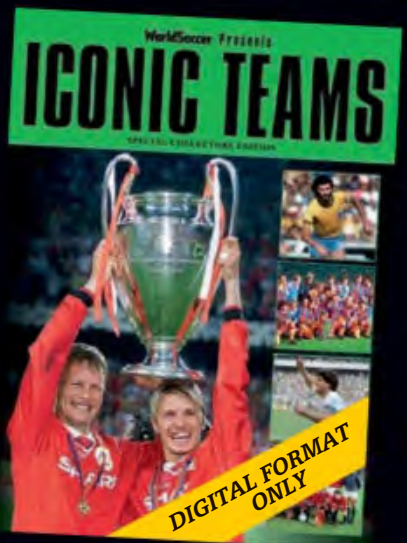

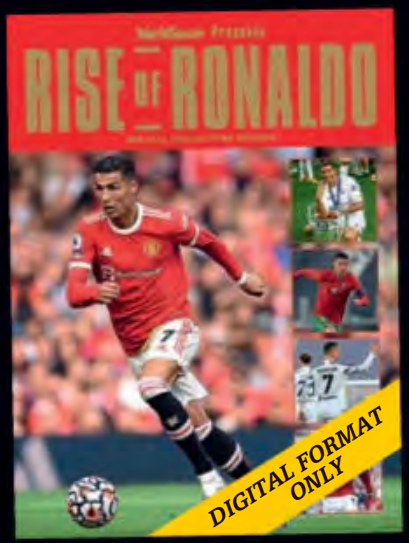

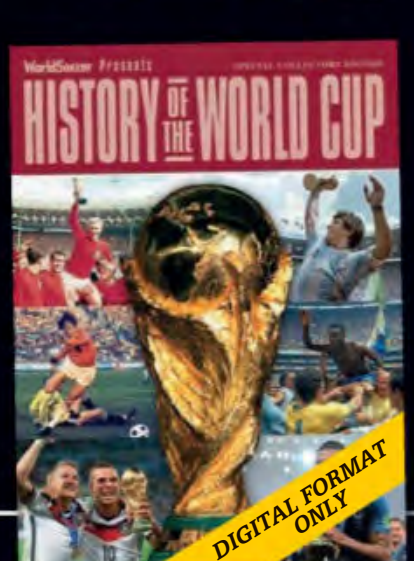

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In Pictures

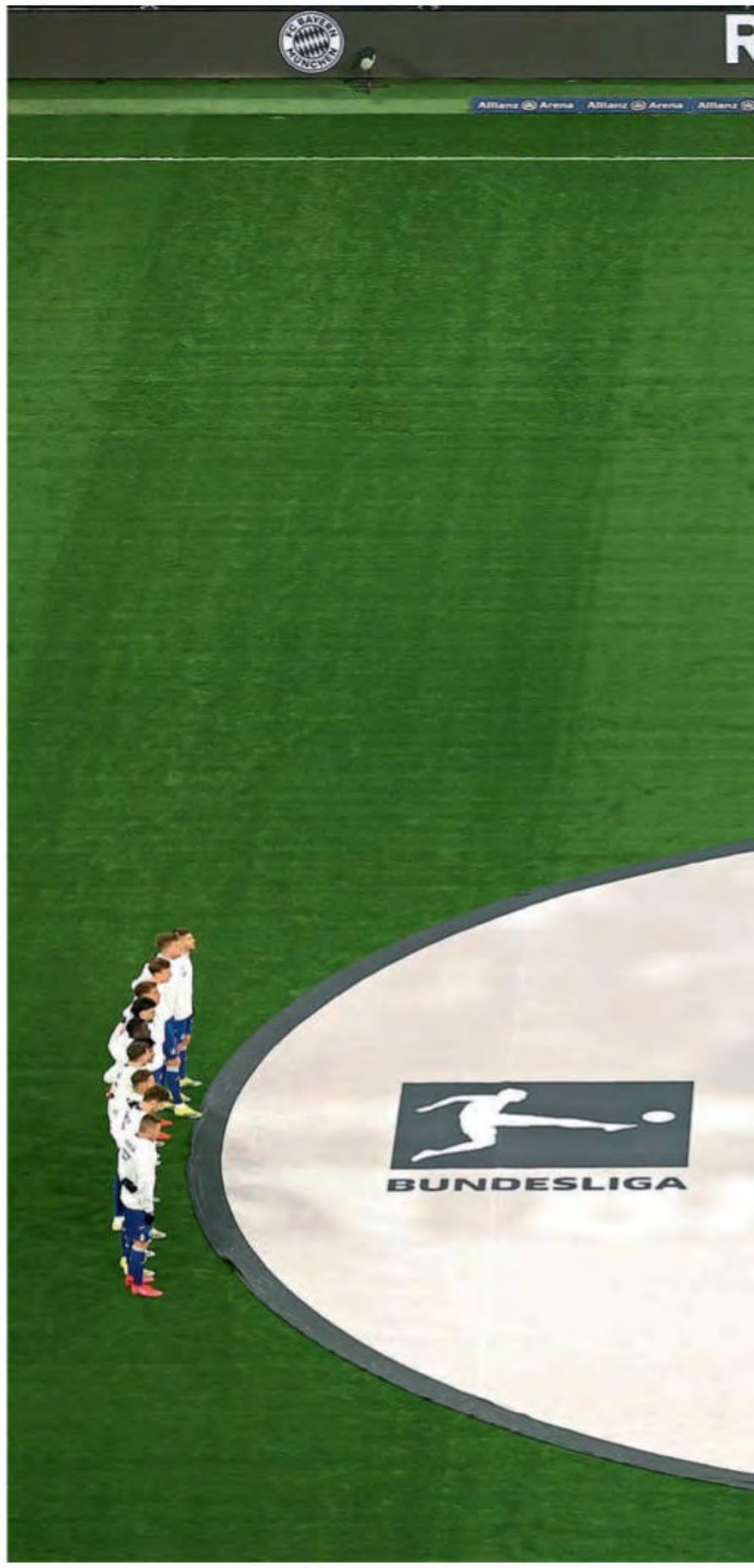
The global game caught on camera

Ivory Coast...inside the opening ceremony of the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations in the Alassane Ouattara Olympic Stadium, Abidjan

Chile...Arturo Vidal is welcomed home like a returning king at Colo-Colo after re-joining the club where he began his career

Italy...Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan remonstrates with the referee after receiving racist abuse from Udinese fans during a Serie A clash

England...Spain and Barcelona star Aitana Bonmati collects The Best FIFA Women's Player award during a ceremony in London



Brazil...a football fan pays his own special tribute to Mario Zagallo after the Brazilian Football Confederation announced seven days of mourning for the legendary former player and manager
More on pages 16 and 28

Saudi Arabia...Vinicius Junior rounds Barcelona goalkeeper Inaki Pena during Real Madrid's Spanish Super Cup final victory in Riyadh

Germany...Bayern Munich pay tribute to the late Franz Beckenbauer
More on pages 14, 16 and 22

Qatar...Iran's Mehdi Taremi, Sardar Azmoun and Ali Gholizadeh celebrate a goal against the United Arab Emirates at the Asian Cup

Qatar...Lebanon defender Khalil Khamis goes in for a high challenge on China's Dai Wai Tsun during the Asian Cup group stage

Qatar...Jordan's players celebrate scoring twice in stoppage time during their dramatic 3-2 victory over Iraq in the last 16 of the Asian Cup

Ivory Coast...ex-Manchester United winger Bebe celebrates after scoring one of the AFCON goals of the tournament, an amazing 40-yard free-kick for Cape Verde v Mozambique

Ivory Coast...Mauritania skipper Bodda Mouhsine celebrates his country's first-ever AFCON win after defeating Algeria in the group stage and knocking out the 2019 champions in the process

Ivory Coast...Equatorial Guinea captain Emilio Nsue celebrates scoring the first of three goals against Guinea-Bissau, the first Africa Cup of Nations hat-trick since 2008

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FROM THE EDITOR

In an Adidas advert, released during the 2006 World Cup, two kids on a Barcelona street agree to a game of football. When it comes to picking their team-mates, there are no limits. "Kaka," says one. "Zidane," responds the other. As the two Ballon d'Or winners jog over, the team building continues:

"Beckham"
"Defoe"
"Kahn"
"Lampard"
"Beckenbauer"
"Beckenbauer?!"

Sure enough, Franz Beckenbauer, in a pristine white 1974 West Germany shirt with number five on the back, joins the makeshift pitch.

The technology of the time didn't quite allow the *Kaiser's* digital image to be imposed into the match action, yet even that brief cameo manages to capture something of his magic. Here was a footballer that left an indelible impression on the game and those that love it, far beyond Bavaria where he spent much of his playing career and long after his retirement. Even today, in streets, playgrounds and parks around the globe, a player dribbling the ball out from the back will still be greeted with cries of "Beckenbauer!" It is a name synonymous with adventurous, attacking football.

> If a footballing Mount Rushmore were commissioned today, Franz Beckenbauer's face would be carved into it

There are a handful of footballers in history whose names truly echo down through the ages, and Beckenbauer is undeniably one of them. If a footballing Mount Rushmore were commissioned today, his face would be carved into it.

In one of life's harsh coincidences, Beckenbauer's death came just days after the passing of a man with whom he shares an incredible record. Brazil's Mario Zagallo was the first man to win the World Cup as both a player and manager, a record that Beckenbauer matched in 1990, and it is no exaggeration to say that, with their passing, football has lost two of its most influential figures of all time. We pay tribute to both in these pages.

Elsewhere, Nick Bidwell casts his eye over the Champions League last 16, plus the standout players in the Europa League and Conference League, while John Duerden re-tells the story of Iraq's remarkable 2007 Asian Cup victory.

As we send this issue to print, the closing stages of this year's competition and the Africa Cup of Nations are drawing to a close. We'll have full reports on both in our next issue.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

ENGLAND & SPAIN

Klopp and Xavi to step down

Liverpool and Barcelona will both begin the 2024-25 season with new managers after Jurgen Klopp and Xavi announced they will step down at the end of the current campaign.

The German's departure was undoubtedly the more surprising, with Liverpool fans and the wider media stunned by his announcement. Speaking to the club's in-house media channel, Klopp said he was "running out of energy" to keep doing the job, and revealed that he had told the hierarchy of his decision to leave in November. Attention now turns to finding his replacement, with ex-Reds midfielder Xabi Alonso, currently impressing at Bayer Leverkusen (more on page 62), the favourite to take charge.

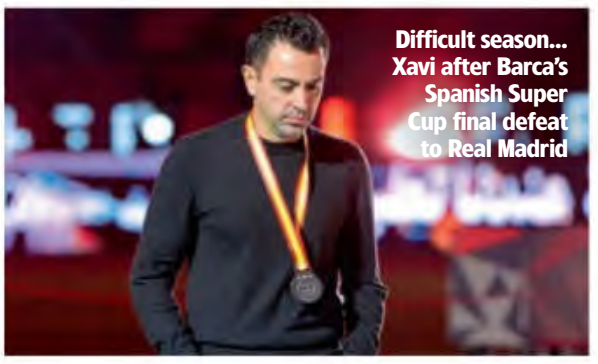
In contrast, Xavi's departure from Barcelona came amidst increasing uncertainty about his future. According to *The Athletic*, the former midfielder's position was the topic of discussion at a meeting of club executives following defeat to Athletic Bilbao in the Copa del Rey – the last competition that Barca could realistically have won this season – and a 5-3 home setback to Villarreal in the league. Club president Joan Laporta had decided to give Xavi more time,

"I will sleep better…they have been our biggest rival and personally he has been my biggest rival from when he was at Borussia Dortmund and I was at Bayern Munich"

Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola reacts to the news that Jurgen Klopp will leave Liverpool this summer

Liverpool legend ...Jurgen Klopp was given a warm Anfield reception in the Reds' first home game after his announcement

only for the coach to inform him that he would be departing come the end of the season.



Difficult season... Xavi after Barca's Spanish Super Cup final defeat to Real Madrid

FIFA

FIFA Awards 2023

The winners of the 2023 Best FIFA Awards were announced at a ceremony in London in January:

Men's Player:
Lionel Messi *(Inter Miami & Argentina)*
Women's Player:
Aitana Bonmati *(Barcelona & Spain)*
Men's Goalkeeper: Ederson *(Man. City & Brazil)*
Women's Goalkeeper:
Mary Earps *(Man. United & England)*
Men's Coach: Pep Guardiola *(Man. City)*
Women's Coach: Sarina Wiegman *(England)*
Puskas Award:
Guilherme Madruga *(Botafogo v Novorizontino)*

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football…

174
By netting against arch-rivals Real Madrid in the Spanish Super Cup, Antoine Griezmann moved to 174 Atletico Madrid career goals – making him the club's all-time top scorer.

98
League places separating Maidstone United and Championship side Ipswich Town before the non-league club's FA Cup giant-killing.

34
Years and 110 days, the age at which Equatorial Guinea captain Emilio Nsue became the oldest-ever hat-trick scorer at the Africa Cup of Nations tournament.

24
Penalties that were taken in the French Cup shootout between holders Toulouse and third-tier Rouen. The lower-league side eventually triumphed 12-11.

8,000
Miles that Martinique-based Golden Lion travelled in a round-trip to face Ligue 1 side Lille in the French Cup, only to lose 12-0.

2
Years that Steven Gerrard extended his contract by at Saudi side Al Ettifaq, keeping him at the club until 2027, despite the departure of his captain Jordan Henderson.

40,000
Guadalajara fans that attended their stadium to welcome home returning striker Javier "Chicharito" Hernandez, who re-joined the club in January from LA Galaxy.

Hero's welcome... Chivas fans in the Akron Stadium

€500,000
Transfer fee paid by Chelsea to Levante – including add-ons – for Colombia striker Mayra Ramirez, which sets a new transfer record for the women's game.

354
Everton's previous record for Premier League appearances, which right-back Seamus Coleman surpassed in January.

2027
Year that Sarina Wiegman has extended her deal to as England Women's manager.

8
Italian Super Cups won by Internazionale, one short of Juventus' all-time record, after they beat Napoli 1-0 in the final in Riyadh.

Match-winner...Lautaro Martinez raises the Italian Super Cup

2
Premier League clubs – Everton and Nottingham Forest – that were charged for alleged breaches of profit and sustainability rules in their accounts for the 2022-23 campaign.

1
Players to have scored in every category of AFCON – the U17, U20, U23 and senior competition – after Zambia striker Patson Daka became the first player to do so.

4
Udinese supporters banned for life by the Serie A club after racially abusing Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan.

£300,000
The starting price for the napkin Lionel Messi signed his first Barcelona contract on in 2000, which goes to auction in March.

18+

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Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Opponents then friends: Beckenbauer and Cruyff

Franz Beckenbauer and Johan Cruyff's relationship defined an era of football

Opponents then friends...Johan Cruyff and Franz Beckenbauer

World football boasts sharply-defined eras in terms of those great players who mark the game with their genius, their achievements and an idiosyncratic creativity which propels it in new directions. The post-war era of the 1950s and early 1960s points up Ferenc Puskas and Alfredo Di Stefano, Pele through into the 1970s, quickly succeeded by the duopoly of Johan Cruyff and Franz Beckenbauer.

Beckenbauer died this past January, Cruyff in 2016. Their names will always be linked not only in delighting a decade, but through innovative football which opened eyes to new visions of how it could be played.

Cruyff, at Ajax and under the initial tutelage of coach Rinus Michels, launched the Total Football revolution. This saw new levels of fitness, technique and tactical intelligence permit an inter-passing, inter-changing manner of performance that stands as a precursor for today's football.

The concept was nothing new. Willy Meisl, in his seminal 1950s book *Soccer Revolution* (still well worth reading), had predicted progress towards a free-wheeling style which he labelled "The Whirl". Cruyff and Ajax brought it to life and were rewarded with a European Cup hat-trick between 1971 and 1973 before coach and captain were enticed away to Barcelona.

The demise of that all-conquering Ajax left the stage clear for another pioneer in Beckenbauer and his Bayern Munich.

Cruyff's Ajax and Beckenbauer's Bayern broke the standard tactical mould of players' fixed positions. Hungary, in the early 1950s, had demonstrated the mayhem generated by the one simple trick of a deep-lying centre-forward. Cruyff's Total Football and Beckenbauer as an attacking *libero* opened up far wider tactical and technical vistas.

Bayern filled the gap left by the abdication of Cruyff and Ajax after 1973 by winning their own European Cup hat-trick between 1974 and

1976. One revolution after another.

In an age before Champions League group stages, and when each country only sent one team to the European Cup, it should not come as a surprise that Beckenbauer and Cruyff came face-to-face only twice in international competition, despite their eras of supremacy overlapping so closely. One such occasion was in the European Cup, one in the World Cup. Both were memorable and both left some lasting resentments. Cruyff won the first, Beckenbauer the second.

Ajax hosted Bayern in a European Cup quarter-final on March 7, 1973. They boasted an aura of two European trophies, while Bayern's pride had been in providing the backbone of West Germany's 1972 European Championship winners. The first half ended goalless but Ajax were magnificent in the second and struck four times through midfielders Arie Haan (twice) and Gerrie Muhren then a Cruyff header in the last minute.

Cruyff was injured for the second leg in Munich, which Bayern won 2-1, but it was a pyrrhic victory. Ajax went on to beat Juventus in the final while Bayern retained their Bundesliga crown. Cruyff then left for Barcelona so, a year later in 1974, Beckenbauer and Bayern collected their own first European Cup trophy.

Weeks later, the rivalry was renewed but at national team level in the World Cup final in West Germany. Cruyff's Netherlands, arrogantly stylish, were favourites but Beckenbauer's West Germany, after a testing campaign, were on home ground in Munich's Olympic Stadium. The image of Beckenbauer and Cruyff, meeting as captains under the watchful gaze of referee Jack Taylor, remains as properly historic as the outcome.

The Dutch opened the scoring with the first-ever penalty in a World Cup final (converted by Johan Neeskens), the Germans levelled with one of their own (Paul Breitner) and then went ahead through Gerd Muller. All before half-time. So it stayed. Beckenbauer hoisted aloft the new FIFA World Cup.

Their rivalry should have been renewed in the European Championship final in Yugoslavia two years later, after Cruyff's Dutchmen and Beckenbauer's West Germans were drawn apart in the semi-finals. Instead Cruyff and Co. lost to Czechoslovakia, who then defeated Beckenbauer's men in the final in a penalty shootout.

> Cruyff's Ajax and Beckenbauer's Bayern broke the standard tactical mould of players' fixed positions

By the time of the next World Cup, in 1978, both men had quit national team football and headed for the fun and glitz (and initial money) of the North American Soccer League (NASL).

They even played together that year, twice, on the same New York Cosmos side in two friendlies against a World All-Stars XI and against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge. But the league refused to let Cruyff join Cosmos because it wanted the big names spread around. Hence, they faced up twice in the NASL: Beckenbauer with Cosmos and Cruyff with Los Angeles Aztecs and then Washington Diplomats.

Retirement saw both enter management, though neither held coaching certificates. Both were winners again at club level with their old clubs but it was Beckenbauer who was once more a World Cup winner, with West Germany in 1990.

Subsequent passing years engendered not only mutual respect but friendship. In 2015, Cruyff told the German magazine *11 Freunde*: "I can't say exactly when we became friends but we instinctively had a great respect for each other. We often saw each other because I always went skiing in Kitzbuhel where [Franz] lives. We did sport together and, in the evenings, sat together. Over the years, the connection became ever stronger."

When Cruyff passed away a year later Beckenbauer tweeted: "I am shocked. He was not only a very good friend but also a brother to me."

Opponents then friends but magisterial footballing pioneers both.

Final foes...Beckenbauer and Cruyff in action in the 1974 World Cup final in Munich's Olympiastadion

BOOKS THIS MONTH

THE AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS
By Ben Jackson
(Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

This book explores the rich history of one of football's iconic but often overlooked tournaments. There are many stories of redemption and achievement, such as the return of South Africa in the 1990s following apartheid, and the triumph of Zambia after the tragedy of 1993. It brings us all the great teams, managers and players who have lit up the tournament, shining a spotlight on African football history.

BIG BOOTS TO FILL
By David Michael Nolan
(Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

This is the story of Argentina's search for an heir to Diego Maradona – players like the great Juan Roman Riquelme, troubled Ariel Ortega, beloved Carlos Tevez and magical Pablo Aimar. Others wilted under the huge weight of expectation and ended their careers in obscure backwaters, playing in lower leagues. It was not until the emergence of Lionel Messi that the country had a worthy wearer of the sobriquet "the new Maradona".

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

World Cup game-changers: Beckenbauer and Zagallo

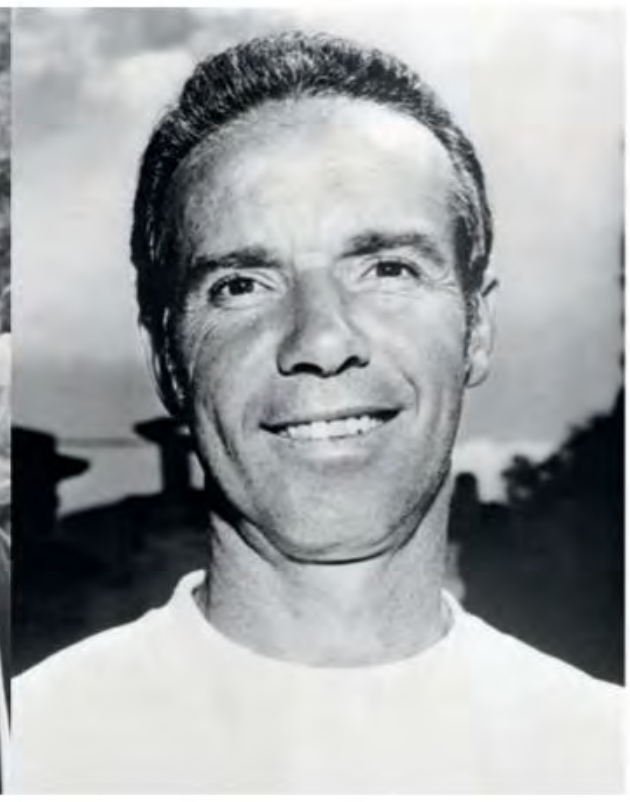
The two World Cup winners had a greater impact on football's tactics as players than as managers

In the space of two days in January, football lost Mario Zagallo and Franz Beckenbauer, two of the three men to have won the World Cup as both a player and a manager. But there is something else that links them: they both changed the tactical evolution of the game as players. Tactical revolutions these days tend to be regarded as the preserve of managers, who change the game with their philosophies. Six decades ago, the process was often more organic.

Brazil had won the 1958 World Cup using a 4-2-4 formation. Teams playing a classic W-M (3-2-2-3) found that the extra defender made it much harder to create situations in which a winger was running at an isolated defender, while at the same time when in possession, Brazil's full-backs could push forward to join the attack from deeper positions that made them very hard to pick up.

The problem was that, once the shock of the new system had dissipated, it became apparent that playing with just two midfielders rendered a team, no matter how technically accomplished, vulnerable. The four midfielders (two wing-halves and two inside-forwards) of the W-M could call the bluff of the side playing 4-2-4, let them operate with a forward more than they had defenders and dominate in the centre by weight of numbers.

What was necessary was to find a way to bolster the midfield without compromising too much the basic shape. So Zagallo, the left-winger, began to drop back more and more. In truth, he had already been doing that in 1958. It's notable that in the World Cup final, he scored one goal and set another up but also cleared a Swedish effort off the line. But the shuttling runs became more pronounced by 1962 – in part, perhaps, because the Brazil that retained the World Cup was simply not as good as the side that had won it for the first time.



World Cup game-changers...Franz Beckenbauer and Mario Zagallo

> It's not just that Zagallo's move brought Brazil their success, it's that it set a template for wide midfielders for years to come

Whose idea it was is harder to say. It may be that that was how Aymore Moreira, the coach in 1962, instructed Zagallo to play. Zagallo himself, never a man to downplay his own genius, always insisted he had done it himself. He had been a number ten, but had realised he had more chance of making the national side on the left wing – that much is true. Whether he then single-handedly, as he liked to claim, reinterpreted the role of the wide midfield-forward is less plausible, but that is not to deny the significance of the innovation, nor his prescience in recognising that his unusual combination of stamina and technical gifts made him ideal for the role. It's not just that Zagallo's move brought Brazil their success, it's that it set a template for wide midfielders for years to come.

By the time England won the World Cup in 1966, they were using two shuttling wingers: Alan Ball on the right, whose movement closely resembled Zagallo's, and Martin Peters, whose starting position tended to be deeper. Alf Ramsey, the manager, had first withdrawn a winger in his days at Ipswich Town, although that was because Jimmy Leadbitter, whom he deployed on the left, lacked the pace

Zagallo-inspired...1966 World Cup winner Martin Peters

to take on a full-back directly. Innovations often have many fathers.

Beckenbauer, similarly, was a player of an unusual combination of skills. He made his debut for Bayern as an 18-year-old on the left wing and when Helmut Schon called him up for West Germany for the first time the following year, although he played him in midfield, he said he expected him to become a forward. He'd actually played most of that season at Bayern as a centre-half, a position that, in Germany at the time, was detailed with marking the opposing centre-forward but who had some licence to advance because of the presence of an *Ausputzer* – a "cleaner" or spare defender – behind him.

The intention had been for him to move into midfield but when Dieter Danzberg, the centre-half Bayern signed in 1965, was sent off in the opening game of Bayern's first Bundesliga season and banned for eight weeks, he was shifted back as cover and performed so well, he became established as Bayern's *libero*. As Beckenbauer himself pointed out, though, if the comparison was made to the Internazionale of Helenio Herrera, the player he most resembled was less the deep-lying *libero* Armando Picchi than the attacking left-back Giacinto Facchetti. It wasn't until 1971 that Schon was sufficiently convinced to let Beckenbauer play there for the national side but, when he did, it brought a European Championship and World Cup.

Blueprint...Facchetti

As a manager, Beckenbauer was conservative, implementing the system he had played with the national side. Zagallo was more innovative, using a fluid 4-5-1 as Brazil won the 1970 World Cup, his focus less on the shape than the sense of the team moving as one unit.

But in truth, the biggest difference both made to tactical evolution of the game was as players, through the innovative application of rare combinations of talent.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Reunited...Ivan Perisic and Nikola Kalinic at Euro 2016

1 2 FOR THE PRICE OF €1

Last month we brought you news of Croatian side Hajduk Split re-signing their former striker Nikola Kalinic on a contract until the end of the season worth just €1, and now he has been joined by one of his old international team-mates, Ivan Perisic. Unlike Kalinic, the ex-Bayern Munich and Inter winger's salary will be a little higher – he will receive €1 per month – on loan from Tottenham. And how did Hajduk get on in their first league game after signing the duo? They lost 2-1 at home to Rijeka, who leapfrogged them to top spot.

2 CONTI CUPSET

Manchester United Women were left scratching their heads after being eliminated from the Conti Cup – aka the Women's League Cup – due to Aston Villa fielding an ineligible player. The Villans were found guilty of using a cup-tied player, Noelle Maritz, in their 7-0 victory over Sunderland in the group stage. Following an investigation, it was decreed that three points instead be awarded to Sunderland who, as a result, leapfrogged Villa to top spot, which in turn pushed United out as one of the two best runners-up. "We are very disappointed with this outcome, and do not understand its rationale," said the Red Devils in a statement.

3 FEISTY FANS

German football fans are known for their activism, as followers of Borussia Dortmund and Stuttgart demonstrated recently. First, Dortmund supporters interrupted their 4-0 victory against Cologne by throwing chocolate coins onto the pitch in protest against an initiative to sell off some of the league's TV rights. Stuttgart – who also protested against the investment proposal – then made their dislike of privately-owned clubs clear when they faced RB Leipzig. Still notoriously unpopular for their Red Bull backing, Leipzig's players were greeted by total silence from the Stuttgart fans for the opening minutes of their Bundesliga clash, before a volley of tennis balls rained down onto the pitch from the stands.

4 COLOMBIAN WIMBLEDON

Spare a thought for fans of Colombian side Alianza Petrolera, who recently learned that their team would be leaving their Barrancabermeja home and relocating almost 300 miles north to Valledupar. The club has struggled financially ever since its formation in 1990, even though they've been a top-flight side since 2012 and last season qualified for the Copa Sudamericana. There was, at least, some solace for heartbroken fans: anyone that bought one of the club's newly-launched "2024 Historic Shirts" would be entitled to a full refund.

5 VAR REMATCH

Belgian authorities may have opened up a can of worms by ordering a match to be replayed following a VAR error. In December, Genk had a goal scored against Anderlecht – from a rebound after a penalty miss – disallowed due to the scorer encroaching in the penalty area, despite the fact that two Anderlecht players also entered the box. According to IFAB laws, the penalty should have been retaken. As a result, the match will be replayed.

6 RONALDO CANCELLED

Any cynics of Al Nassr's intentions behind their planned tour of China in January might have felt vindicated after the Saudi team postponed two friendlies following an injury to Cristiano Ronaldo. In protest, angry fans reportedly stormed the team's hotel in Shenzhen.

Hero's welcome ...fans in China were excited to see CR7 in action

"We have lost one of the great symbols of Italian football. A fantastic player and above all a real man"

Fabio Capello pays tribute to Italy great and his former *Azzurri* team-mate Luigi Riva

OBITUARIES

Luigi RIVA
(1944-2024)

The great Luigi "Gigi" Riva was an old-fashioned sort of football hero, a superstar goalscorer loyal to an unfashionable club who turned down a relentless stream of offers from the giants of *Calcio*.

Riva, more remarkably, remains the Italy national team's all-time leading marksman on 35 goals in 42 games; none of today's fellow countrymen approach his level or scoring rate (0.83 goals per game). Second and third behind him are pre-war heroes Giuseppe Meazza (33) and Silvio Piola (30). All this in today's era when other nations' marksmen have left Riva's tally far behind: ten Germans, six each from Brazil, England and France, and three from Argentina and Spain. The only "recent" Italians to come anywhere near his tally are Roberto Baggio and Alessandro Del Piero (27).

Nicknamed by journalist Gianni Brera as the *"Rombo di Tuono"* ("Rumble of Thunder" or "Thunderclap"), Riva was not only a member of the Italy team that won the European Championship on home soil in 1968, but scored the first goal in the replayed victory over Yugoslavia. Two years later, he was there in the Estadio Azteca as the *Azzurri* finished runners-up to an irresistible Brazil in the World Cup final. Riva had scored twice in the quarter-final defeat of hosts Mexico and once in the semi-final thriller against West Germany. Weeks earlier, in that same 1970, he had led Cagliari to their one and only league title.

Yet Riva, despite his abiding loyalty for Sardinia and Cagliari in particular, had been born and brought up on the mainland border between Lombardy and Piedmont, in the village of Leggiuno overlooking Lake Maggiore.

Riva endured a tough childhood. He was nine when his father died in a factory accident and, after his mother died of cancer, he was brought up by his sister. He was bullied in school and found an escape in local football, eventually with Serie C Legnano. His physical power and ability to drift in from the left wing and shake off even the most rugged of defenders to score goals consistently drew national youth selection, interest from bigger clubs and ultimately a transfer to Cagliari in Serie B in 1963.

Riva scored on his debut against Prato in the first game of what proved to be a promotion-winning season and never looked back. He made his inevitable Italy debut in 1965 in a friendly against Hungary in Budapest. Riva, on for Ezio Pascutti after only eight minutes, thus became Cagliari's first-ever senior international footballer. A year later, national team coach Edmondo Fabbri included him in an initial World Cup preparation squad. Ultimately, he was omitted from the squad and travelled to England only as a spectator to see his team-mates suffer their North Korean disaster at Middlesbrough's Ayresome Park.

A single-minded determination to progress the next season saw Riva become Serie A's top scorer with 18 goals despite fracturing a leg while on international duty. Two years later he was *capocannoniere* again, with 20 goals in 29 games, then in 1969-70 he inspired Cagliari's historic league title success. His leadership and top-scoring exploits once more – 21 this time, mainly scored with headers and his left foot – led to coach Manlio Scopigno joking: "Gigi only uses his right foot to step onto the tram."

Euro '68...Italy pose ahead of the final. Riva back row, third from the left

Italian icon ...portrait of Riva in 1970

Riva's career was at its zenith. His goals and roles with Italy at European and World Cup level saw him voted runner-up in the 1969 European Footballer of the Year poll, behind international team-mate Gianni Rivera, and third in 1970 behind Gerd Muller and Bobby Moore. Then, in an international against Austria at the end of the year, came a second leg fracture.

The 1974 World Cup in West Germany, when the *Azzurri* tumbled out in the group stage, proved Riva's international swansong. Two years later, at 31, he played his last game for Cagliari, as further injuries eventually forced his retirement. Serie A defenders breathed a sigh of relief.

Riva had been Serie A's top scorer three times and totalled 205 goals, including 164 in the league, for Cagliari between 1963 and 1976. His club honoured him by retiring his iconic No.11 jersey.

Later, Riva took up various managerial roles with Cagliari and the Italian Football Federation, including the victorious 2006 World Cup campaign. At the time of his death from a heart attack, he was Cagliari's honorary president.

He once said he never regretted turning down big offers to stay in Sardinia, only that: "My parents didn't see me become famous."

Keir Radnedge

"Jorge Griffa was the guru of football development in Argentina, and Newell's followed his ideas which placed their academy at the top of the scale"

Former Argentina and Real Madrid forward Jorge Valdano on the late Jorge Griffa

Influential...Jorge Griffa ahead of the 2022 World Cup

Jorge GRIFFA
(1935-2024)
Plucked from Newell's Old Boys by Atletico Madrid in 1959, shortly after helping Argentina win the South American Championship, the defender spent ten years in Spain and won five trophies, including the 1961-62 Cup Winners' Cup – all despite playing the majority of his career with a torn ACL, an injury he suffered at the age of 21.

After retiring, Griffa returned home to Rosario. Following a brief spell as Newell's manager, he set his mind to the recruitment and development of young players. In roles at Old Boys and later Boca Juniors, Griffa discovered several future Argentina internationals including Jorge Valdano, Gabriel Batistuta, Carlos Tevez, Maxi Rodriguez, Walter Samuel, Gabriel Heinze and Ever Banega.

Griffa was also a major influence for Marcelo Bielsa. The duo worked together as scouts for Newell's, with the current Uruguay boss once describing his former colleague as a "master".

Dror KASHTAN
(1944-2024)
Coach of a host of Israeli sides – including Hapoel Lod, Beitar Jerusalem, Maccabi Haifa, Hapoel Haifa, Maccabi Tel Aviv and Hapoel Tel Aviv – before taking charge of the national team between 2006 and 2010. Described by former Israel captain Yossi Benayoun as: "Without a doubt one of the greatest coaches in Israel's history."

Bennie MULLER
(1938-2024)
Diminutive midfielder who played 426 games for Ajax between 1958 and 1970, winning five league titles and three cups. He also won 43 caps for the Netherlands.

Mark Gleeson

Mel BLYTH
(1944-2024)
The scorer of Crystal Palace's first-ever top-flight goal in 1969, the centre-half later joined Southampton and played a part in their surprise 1976 FA Cup win.

Angel CASTELLANOS
(1952-2024)
Tough-tackling centre-back or midfielder, who was a key player for Valencia when they won the 1978-79 Copa del Rey and Cup Winners' Cup a year later.

Alberto FESTA
(1939-2024)
A Portugal international of 19 caps, three of which came at the 1966 World Cup.

Stephen LAYBUTT
(1977-2024)
A member of the Australian Under-23 side that competed on home soil at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, Laybutt went on to win 15 caps for the Socceroos. He played in Europe for the likes of Gent and Feyenoord, and won the A-League title with Newcastle Jets in 2007-08.

John HURST
(1947-2024)
In 1965, Hurst became the first-ever player to be substituted on for Everton, and in 11 seasons on Merseyside the defender played 404 games. He ended his playing career at Oldham, before returning to Goodison Park in the 1990s as part of Joe Royle's backroom staff.

Jean PETIT
(1949-2024)
French league champion with Monaco in 1978 and 1982, having spent his entire career at the club from 1969 to 1982. Named French Player of the Year in 1978 and went on to play for France at that year's World Cup in Argentina.

Mark Gleeson

Klaus WUNDER
(1950-2024)
The former Bayern Munich striker came off the bench to replace Uli Hoeness in the club's European Cup final victory in 1975. Won one cap for West Germany.

Franz BECKENBAUER
(1945-2024)
Bayern Munich and Germany legend.

Full tribute on page 22

Keith LAMB
(1946-2024)
Former long-serving chief executive of Middlesbrough, from 1986 to 2011, who helped oversee their rise from near-extinction to winning their first major trophy and a European final.

Bertin OLLE OLLE
(1961-2024)
Cameroon midfielder who won the 1988 Africa Cup of Nations with his country.

Peter JOHNSON
(1939-2024)
Former chairman of Tranmere Rovers and later Everton.

Bohdan SHERSHUN
(1981-2024)
Ukrainian centre-back who reached the final of the U19 Euros in 2000, and went on to win four senior caps. Played for a host of clubs in his home country, but his most successful spell came in Russia at CSKA Moscow where he won six trophies.

RICARDO
(1931-2024)
The former striker still holds the record for most goals in a single season in Spain's second division, scoring 46 times for Gijon in 1956-57. Joined Valencia the following campaign and topped the scoring charts yet again, this time sharing top spot with Real Madrid legend Alfredo Di Stefano and Manuel Badenes of Valladolid.

Serhiy ROZHOK
(1985-2024)
The former Dynamo Kyiv and Ukraine youth midfielder was killed while fighting for the Ukrainian army against Russia.

Tommy BALDWIN
(1945-2024)
After starting his career at Arsenal, Baldwin made his name at Chelsea, joining the Blues as part of the deal that took George Graham in the other direction. A reliable goalscorer, he helped Chelsea win the FA Cup in 1970 and the Cup Winners' Cup a year later.

Mario ZAGALLO
(1931-2024)
Brazilian World Cup winner as a player, manager and assistant.

Full tribute on page 28

"We've got titles to go after and we've already won one, so that's already done. After that, no, I haven't made up my mind yet"

Paris Saint-Germain forward Kylian Mbappe admits he doesn't know where he'll be playing next season

IN

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

63 Moves That Caught Our Eye This Month

OUT

EUROPE

JADON SANCHO & IAN MAATSEN
The Manchester United winger returned to former club **Dortmund** on loan. The Germans also signed Maatsen on loan from Chelsea.

TIMO WERNER
Tottenham loaned the ex-Chelsea forward from RB Leipzig until the end of the season.

JORDAN HENDERSON
The England midfielder ended his short stay in Saudi Arabia, joining Dutch giants **Ajax**.

KALVIN PHILLIPS
West Ham United signed the Manchester City midfielder on loan for the rest of the season.

ERIC DIER
Bayern Munich signed the Tottenham defender until the end of the season.

DJED SPENCE & SERGIO REGUILON
Tottenham loaned out full-backs Spence and Reguilon to **Genoa** and **Brentford** respectively.

BEN BRERETON DIAZ & IVO GRBIC
Sheffield United signed Chile's Brereton Diaz on loan from Villarreal and Grbic from Atletico.

SASA KALAJDZIC & DONNY VAN DE BEEK
The duo joined **Eintracht Frankfurt** on loan from Wolves and Manchester United respectively.

HANNIBAL MEJBRI & FACUNDO PELLISTRI
The Red Devils also sent midfielder Hannibal on loan to **Sevilla** and winger Pellistri to **Granada**.

ENES UNAL
Bournemouth signed Unal on loan from Getafe.

HAMED TRAORE, KIEFFER MOORE, DAVID BROOKS & EMILIANO MARCONDES
The quartet departed Bournemouth for loans at **Napoli**, **Ipswich**, **Southampton** and **Hibernian**.

GIOVANNI REYNA & OREL MANGALA
Nottingham Forest signed Reyna on loan from Dortmund and sent Mangala on loan to **Lyon**.

ARMANDO BROJA, ANDREY SANTOS & DAVID DATRO FOFANA
The three youngsters left Chelsea on loan for **Fulham**, **Strasbourg** and **Burnley** respectively.

EMMANUEL DENNIS
Watford re-signed the Forest striker on loan.

FABIO CARVALHO
After recalling him from a spell at RB Leipzig, Liverpool sent Carvalho on loan to **Hull City**.

MAHMOUD DAHOUD
Stuttgart loaned the Brighton midfielder.

THILO KEHRER
Monaco signed the West Ham man on loan.

LEANDER DENDONCKER
Napoli signed the Aston Villa ace on loan.

CARLOS ALCARAZ
Juventus loaned the Southampton midfielder.

ANGELINO & MARASH KUMBULLA
Roma signed Angelino on loan from RB Leipzig and shipped out Kumbulla on loan to **Sassuolo**.

DANIEL MALDINI
Paolo's son joined **Monza** on loan from Milan.

JEROME BOATENG
The German joined **Salernitana** as a free agent.

YERRY MINA
Cagliari signed the defender from Fiorentina.

CEDRIC BAKAMBU & BORJA IGLESIAS
Real Betis paid €5m to Galatasaray for DR Congo striker Bakambu, then sent Iglesias on loan to **Bayer Leverkusen**.

LUCIEN AGOUME & ALEJO VELIZ
Sevilla completed loan deals for Agoume from Internazionale and striker Veliz from Tottenham.

GONCALO GUEDES & BERTRAND TRAORE
Villarreal signed Guedes on loan from Wolves and Traore on a free transfer from Aston Villa.

LEONARDO BONUCCI & CAGLAR SOYUNCU
Fenerbahce signed Bonucci from Union Berlin and Soyuncu on loan from Atletico Madrid.

GABRIEL PAULISTA
Atletico signed the Valencia defender on a free.

MAURICIO PELLEGRINO
The coach replaced Sergio as manager of **Cadiz**.

DAVIDE NICOLA
Nicola replaced Aurelio Andreazzoli at **Empoli**.

JOSE MOURINHO
Roma sacked their manager *(more on page 70)*.

IVAN HASEK
Hasek took charge of **Czech Republic**.

STEVEN DAVIS
Northern Ireland's most-capped player retired after failing to return from injury for **Rangers**.

SOUTH AMERICA

DORIVAL JUNIOR
The Sao Paulo boss took charge of **Brazil** after Fernando Diniz ended his caretaker role.

RICARDO GARECA
The ex-Peru boss took charge of **Chile**.

ARTURO VIDAL
The Chilean returned to first club **Colo-Colo**.

DOUGLAS COSTA
The ex-Brazil winger joined **Fluminense**.

AFRICA

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS EXITS
Six AFCON managers left their roles before the end of the tournament: **CHRIS HUGHTON (Ghana)**, **TOM SAINTFIET (Gambia)**, **JEAN-LOUIS GASSET (Ivory Coast)**, **DJAMEL BELMADI (Algeria)**, **JALEL KADRI (Tunisia)** and **ADEL AMROUCHE (Tanzania)**.

ASIA

IVAN RAKITIC
Al Shabab signed the Croatian from Sevilla.

IGOR BISCAN
The coach left **Al Shabab** after two months.

JUAN MATA
The Spaniard became a free agent after being released by Japanese champions **Vissel Kobe**.

CONCACAF

JAVIER HERNANDEZ
The Mexico striker returned to first club **Chivas**.

"West Ham United confirm Said Benrahma has joined French Ligue 1 club Olympique Lyonnais on loan until the end of the 2023-24 season ...everyone at West Ham United would like to wish Said the best"

The Hammers confirm the Algeria winger's move to Lyon after initial confusion over the transfer on deadline day

MOST EXPENSIVE DEALS IN EUROPE'S JANUARY TRANSFER WINDOW 2024

€30m	**Vitor ROQUE**	*(Athletico Paranaense to Barcelona)*
€30m	**Sacha BOEY**	*(Galatasaray to Bayern Munich)*
€25m	**Radu DRAGUSIN**	*(Genoa to Tottenham Hotspur)*
€25m	**Eljif ELMAS**	*(Napoli to RB Leipzig)*
€23m	**Renan LODI**	*(Marseille to Al Hilal)*
€21m	**Adam WHARTON**	*(Blackburn Rovers to Crystal Palace)*
€20m	**Lucas BERALDO**	*(Sao Paulo to Paris Saint-Germain)*
€20m	**Gabriel MOSCARDO**	*(Corinthians to Paris Saint-Germain)**
€20m	**Luiz HENRIQUE**	*(Real Betis to Botafogo)*
€18m	**Arthur VERMEEREN**	*(Royal Antwerp to Atletico Madrid)*
€18m	**Marcos LEONARDO**	*(Santos to Benfica)*
€18m	**Cyril NGONGE**	*(Verona to Napoli)*
€17m	**Malick FOFANA**	*(Gent to Lyon)*
€16m	**Azor MATUSIWA**	*(Reims to Rennes)*
€15m	**ARTUR**	*(Palmeiras to Zenit)*
€14.5m	**Claudio ECHEVERRI**	*(River Plate to Manchester City)**
€13m	**Manfred UGALDE**	*(Twente to Spartak Moscow)*
€12m	**Gift ORBAN**	*(Gent to Lyon)*
€12m	**KEVIN**	*(Palmeiras to Shakhtar Donetsk)*
€12m	**Marlon GOMES**	*(Vasco da Gama to Shakhtar Donetsk)*
€12m	**Santiago CASTRO**	*(Velez Sarsfield to Bologna)*
€12m	**OTAVIO**	*(Famalicao to Porto)*
€12m	**Quentin MERLIN**	*(Nantes to Marseille)*
€12m	**Mohamed-Ali CHO**	*(Real Sociedad to Nice)*
€11m	**Alidu SEIDU**	*(Clermont to Rennes)*
€10m	**Daniel MUNOZ**	*(Genk to Crystal Palace)*
€10m	**Tommaso BALDANZI**	*(Empoli to Roma)*
€9.4m	**Morgan ROGERS**	*(Middlesbrough to Aston Villa)*
€9.2m	**Valentin BARCO**	*(Boca Juniors to Brighton & Hove Albion)*
€9m	**PEDRO**	*(Corinthians to Zenit)*
€9m	**Lucas VERISSIMO**	*(Benfica to Al Duhail)*
€9m	**Gianluca PRESTIANNI**	*(Velez Sarsfield to Benfica)*
€9m	**Isak HIEN**	*(Verona to Atalanta)*
€9m	**Matias VINA**	*(Roma to Flamengo)*
€8.9m	**Petar MUSA**	*(Benfica to FC Dallas)*
€8m	**Jean-Matteo BAHOYA**	*(Angers to Eintracht Frankfurt)*
€8m	**Faris MOUMBAGNA**	*(Bodo/Glimt to Marseille)*
€8m	**Pablo FORNALS**	*(West Ham United to Real Betis)*
€7.6m	**Kosta NEDELJKOVIC**	*(Red Star Belgrade to Aston Villa)*
€7.3m	**Kevin CASTANO**	*(Cruz Azul to Krasnodar)*
€7m	**Tajon BUCHANAN**	*(Club Brugge to Internazionale)*
€7m	**Ruslan MALINOVSKYI**	*(Marseille to Genoa)*
€7m	**Momodou Lamin SONKO**	*(Hacken to Gent)*
€6m	**Matz SELS**	*(Strasbourg to Nottingham Forest)*
€6m	**Joao VICTOR**	*(Benfica to Vasco da Gama)*
€6m	**Sergio AKIEME**	*(Almeria to Reims)*
€5.9m	**Josh DOIG**	*(Verona to Sassuolo)*
€5.8m	**Johnny CARDOSO**	*(Internacional to Real Betis)*
€5.1m	**Tiago DJALO**	*(Lille to Juventus)*

**Player will remain at current club on loan*

Valentin BARCO

Described by Tim Vickery in the February issue of *World Soccer* as Boca Juniors' "little red-headed figure who made a big impact in the second half of 2023", Barco is a utility man capable of playing anywhere on the left flank. Young players that arrive at Brighton these days do so with a weight of expectation, and Seagulls manager Roberto De Zerbi name checked Alexis Mac Allister and Moises Caicedo – South American recruits that starred on the south coast before leaving in big-money deals – as role models for his latest signing. An Argentina U23 international, his arrival at the Amex was delayed by taking part in an Olympic qualifying tournament in Venezuela.

Gift ORBAN

Last season, Orban was turning heads across Europe after chalking up an impressive goal record. After joining Gent from Norwegian outfit Stabaek in January 2023 – where he'd scored 19 goals in 24 games – the Nigerian netted 14 goals in his first 14 matches, including the fastest-ever hat-trick in a UEFA club competition. He has been less prolific in 2023-24, scoring just three times in 17 Belgian league games, but has continued to plunder goals in the Conference League with nine in ten games, including two hat-tricks. Struggling Lyon certainly hope that he can recover his Midas touch in their battle against Ligue 1 relegation.

MARLON GOMES

The route from Brazil to Shakhtar is a well-trodden path, and, even in the face of war, the Ukrainian club continue to recruit players from South America. Six Brazilians have been signed this season, with the 20-year-old Gomes the standout. The midfield playmaker starred in Brazil's victory in last year's South American U20 Championship, and will head to Shakhtar after playing in Olympic qualifying for the U23s.

Mohamed-Ali CHO

Described as a "superstar in the making" by *World Soccer* after he burst onto the Ligue 1 scene with Angers, Cho's career has stalled since joining Real Sociedad in June 2022. The forward only completed 90 minutes once in La Liga, as injuries hampered his progress. Having made his senior debut as a 16-year-old, and with a game defined by explosive bursts, there are concerns that his muscular problems may be the result of too much, too young. Ligue 1 high-flyers Nice will hope to unlock his undoubted potential.

Faris MOUMBAGNA

Players recruited from Bodo/Glimt, one of the most smartly run clubs in Europe, always catch the eye. Based within the Arctic Circle, the Scandinavians have had to be enterprising recruiters in their journey to the top of Norwegian football and the knockout rounds of the Europa Conference League, and Moumbagna is one such example. A Cameroon international (limited to a substitute role at this year's AFCON), he scored six goals in the qualifiers and group stage of the Europa Conference league, and 15 in the 2023 Norwegian league. A bustling yet nimble striker with a sharp left foot.

Der Kaiser

Keir Radnedge pays tribute to Germany's greatest-ever player, Franz Beckenbauer

"Great" is an overused word in the football world, but it is most appropriate for Franz Beckenbauer whose death followed so hard upon those of World Cup rivals Sir Bobby Charlton and Mario Zagallo.

Beckenbauer, who died at 78 after several years of failing health, stands without peer as not only the greatest German player of all time – and possibly the greatest German sportsman – but one of the greatest footballers in the history of the game. He made up a remarkable triumvirate, with Zagallo and Didier Deschamps, who won the World Cup as player and coach. He and Deschamps were both captains, too.

Gunter Netzer, Beckenbauer's European Championship-winning team-mate in 1972, led the multitude of tributes by saying: "There was no better football player than Franz Beckenbauer in the past and there will be no better in the future."

Beckenbauer, born and raised in the southern Munich suburb of Giesing on September 11, 1945, built his reputation with Bayern Munich before enjoying a four-year American adventure with the New York Cosmos before one last, brief Bundesliga hurrah with Hamburg.

He won 103 caps, the World Cup, European Championship, Intercontinental Cup, three European Cups, a European Cup Winners' Cup, five Bundesliga titles plus four German Cups and three North American Soccer League Superbowls. He was voted European Footballer of the Year twice and Germany's number one on four occasions plus his nation's footballer of the century. As a manager, he led West Germany to the 1990 World Cup and Bayern to the Bundesliga title and UEFA Cup.

Alone that adds up to a formidable record without factoring in the playing revolution that Beckenbauer inspired as an attacking sweeper. The early 1960s had been marked by the pragmatism of Italian clubs, notably Helenio Herrera's Internazionale, with their deep-lying extra central defender. Ironically, Beckenbauer, with the encouragement of Bayern coach Zlatko "Cik" Cajkovski, drew his inspiration from Inter's attacking left-back, Giacinto Facchetti.

Years later, he recalled: "As a boy, I started in attack and was always rushing towards the other team's goal. Our children's coach once told me: 'You must stay in defence,' but I was always convinced that my strength lay in attacking. When I went to Bayern, Cik worked out a system in which, when I linked up with attacks, someone else always covered me in defence. Like Facchetti, I could go anywhere – left, right, centre. I developed his 'science'."

All that lay in the future.

The boy Beckenbauer took his first steps on the football ladder with local club SC 1906 Munich. With the junior team set to close, he was expected to move to 1860 Munich but, after after a slap in the face from an opponent in a teenage derby, he decided to join Bayern instead. He was studying insurance when, at 17, Bayern offered him a contract.

Different times. This was 1963, the year the Bundesliga was founded, without Bayern. Beckenbauer would recall: "Back then, sport was not important. There was no professional football. Germany had many other, bigger problems. My father, as well as our neighbour, were against me choosing football. It's understandable. No one knew how it would go. But I chose Bayern. Two years later we went up into the Bundesliga and I played my first international."

One of the greatest of all time...Franz Beckenbauer

World Cup winner ...Beckenbauer lifts the trophy in 1974

> "As a boy, I started in attack and was always rushing towards the other team's goal. Our children's coach once told me: 'You must stay in defence,' but I was always convinced that my strength lay in attacking"

The occasion, away to Sweden, was one to test the nerve of the most experienced player, never mind a fledgling newcomer: qualification for the 1966 World Cup finals was at stake. The odds were against West Germany. Yet they won 2-1 and Beckenbauer was a fixture for a decade.

In the finals, Beckenbauer scored twice in the Germans' opening 5-0 defeat of Switzerland, one more in the bruising quarter-final against Uruguay (4-0) and another in the 2-1 semi-final victory over the Soviet Union. In the final, coach Helmut Schon tasked Beckenbauer with man-marking England's creative force Bobby Charlton. Both were anonymous. Arguably, West Germany suffered more from the personal stalemate than England.

Four years later, Germany made it to the semi-finals, where they lost 4-3 to Italy after a madcap extra-time. Beckenbauer played the closing stages with his arm in a sling after a shoulder dislocation in what stands as Germany's "game of the century." Time, then, for new beginnings as not only captain for the 1972 European Championship but a switch back to sweeper, his grace and elegance personified in partnership with Netzer. Beckenbauer held the trophy aloft after a 3-0 defeat of the Soviets in the final.

Two years later, Beckenbauer attained his career pinnacle in leading the World Cup hosts to victory over Johan Cruyff's Netherlands at his home stadium in Munich. It was the ultimate reproof to critics still insisting he was wasting his talent as attacking sweeper.

Another two years and Beckenbauer celebrated his 100th appearance – Germany's first centurion – in the final of the 1976 European Championship in Belgrade. It could have been a night to remember for so many reasons, but this time West Germany lost to Czechoslovakia in a shootout made famous by Antonin Panenka's winning penalty. A year later, Beckenbauer bowed out of national team football with a then-record 103 caps to his name.

Beckenbauer, not only with West Germany but also with Bayern, had won every major prize on offer. In an increasingly frenetic modern game, the sweeper role had provided him with the time and space in which to work his magical, winning influence.

His power at Bayern was unique, partly since Robert Schwan, his personal Svengali, was also the club's general manager. Schwan kept local politicians on board as Bayern walked a financial tightrope. The conflict of interest was never challenged because the trophies kept on coming.

Bayern won the German Cup in 1966 and the European Cup Winners' Cup in 1967. Beckenbauer was appointed captain for the 1968-69 season and led the club to their first Bundesliga

Historic achievement... Beckenbauer celebrates after guiding West Germany to 1990 World Cup glory

success. Subsequently they won three league titles in a row from 1972 to 1974 and then a hat-trick of European Cups between 1974 and 1976. Also, in 1976, they beat South American champions Cruzeiro of Brazil 2-0 on aggregate in the Intercontinental Cup. Beckenbauer and team-mates, such as goalkeeper Sepp Maier and goalscoring extraordinaire Gerd Muller, were therefore simultaneously reigning world champions for both club and country.

Then, in 1977, came the move to New York. "I received an offer from Cosmos. How could anyone miss the chance to play with Pele?" Beckenbauer said.

He moved back into midfield during his four years in New York; the Cosmos believed the American public too naive to understand why their latest high-profile superstar played "on defence". He loved the celebrity lifestyle and, alongside Pele, won three North American Soccer League (NASL) championships. It was "the best time of my life," he admitted.

He returned to Germany to pick up another Bundesliga title with Hamburg before returning stateside for one final campaign with the Cosmos in 1983 and then retiring. His tally in domestic leagues added up to 81 goals in 587 games, including 44 goals in 424 Bundesliga appearances.

Beckenbauer was immediately in demand as a newspaper and television columnist and was invited to put negative words into positive deeds on being offered the post of national team coach in succession to Jupp Derwall after the Germans' drab Euro 1984 showing, where they crashed out in the group stage for the first time.

The DFB had always promoted from within. Beckenbauer was an outsider with a "name" but no coaching experience. His appointment represented a huge gamble, not only with his own golden reputation but by DFB president Hermann Neuberger. He protested that he did not possess a coaching licence. Neuberger told him: "Don't worry about that."

Beckenbauer's first crack at management lasted six years and brought a double return to the World Cup final. His West Germany lacked the talent and artistry of the early 1970s side, but Beckenbauer led them to the runners-up slot against Diego Maradona's Argentina in 1986 and a revenge triumph four years later in Rome at Italia '90.

Now Beckenbauer retired yet again, only to return to coaching on three brief occasions – once with Marseille and then twice with Bayern to win a German league title in 1994 and the UEFA Cup in 1996.

His next step was into football politics as president of Bayern, then as vice-president of the DFB and bid leader and organising figurehead for Germany's 2006 World Cup staging. In 2009 he was appointed honorary president of Bayern, and in 2011 he stood down from the FIFA executive committee after serving only one four-year term.

A decade later, and he had long quit media punditry before retreating from public life. Ill health and family concerns took their toll. The stress of a hip replacement and two heart procedures was exacerbated by the death from cancer of Stephan, one of his five children.

Football's filmic highlights will parade not Beckenbauer's last painful years in the shadows but fabulous images of the youngster trading steps with Bobby Charlton in 1966, defying a dislocated shoulder in 1970 and, true to his imperious nickname of *Der Kaiser*, hoisting the World Cup in 1974...on his way to sporting immortality.

***Danke, Franz...* Bayern Munich pay tribute**

'The concept of the attacking *libero* suited me down to the ground'

In tribute to *Der Kaiser*, we re-visit some of Franz Beckenbauer's quotes to have featured in *World Soccer* interviews over the years

What is your fondest memory from your playing career?
Taking part in the 1966 World Cup finals in England at the age of just 20 was a real thrill. After all, I'd only made my full international debut the previous autumn. Probably the most satisfying match of my career was our 3-1 victory over England in 1972, a European Championship quarter-final. It was our first-ever victory at Wembley and it was a night when everything fell into place for us. We combined stylishly, were physically strong and took our chances. Six years after our unlucky loss to England in the 1966 World Cup final we had our revenge.

How different was your era from today?
It's night and day. Early in my career semi-professionalism was still in vogue in Germany. For example, in my first year in the Bundesliga [1965-66], I had a part-time job measuring up huge rolls of fabric in a fashion house. You could say we did things differently back then. We'd travel to games in the sleeping car of a train and stay in bed-and-breakfasts rather than five-star hotels.

You played football for 20 years. What major changes did you witness during your career?
When I started in 1964 the system was different. We had no sweeper. By the end we had a rolling system, where the full-backs got forward and scored goals and the striker went back to defend. The players got much better physically. But what I missed was the great personalities. The big stars like Pele, Cruyff, Bobby Moore, Bobby Charlton. The Italians had the great Mazzola, Rivera, Riva. Later, I might have said Maradona, Rummenigge, Zico...but ten years earlier I could name 20. Maybe it was because of the change in the style of soccer. Kids began to be chosen for their physique not their ability, because coaches wanted to win.

If you could rerun your career, would you do anything differently?
Certainly not. I enjoyed a life in top-class sport I could not have imagined as a young man. I had so many wonderful experiences in the game, among them captaining West Germany to victory at the 1974 World Cup, winning three Champions Cups with Bayern and serving as coach when the *Nationalmannschaft* became world champions in 1990. I had the honour too of being the president of the 2006 World Cup organising committee. I've travelled the world and met some extraordinary people. I wouldn't change a thing.

When you won the World Cup as coach, you said you had achieved all you could. Yet you chose to later manage Marseille. Why?
At the time I had never had the opportunity of managing a team on a day-to-day basis. As the coach of the Germany national team I had the players maybe three or four days per month, and I wanted to see what it was like having access to a team every day. When I made the deal with Marseille I was approached at virtually the same time by Alan Rothenberg [then-president of the United States Soccer Federation] to become coach of the US national team, which I turned down.

As a manager you developed a habit of standing next to the bench for the entire duration of the game. Why?
The first time I was involved as coach of the Germany national team we played in Dusseldorf. I soon discovered that the worst position for a coach is to be sitting on the bench, because your view is limited, so during the game I stood up and found I had a better view, and it stayed like that. The best place in the stadium is up in the stands but you need to be close to the field, so standing next to the bench was a good compromise.

In the early 1970s you revolutionised the game with your switch from midfield to an attacking sweeper role. Was it your idea?
Pretty much. I'd noticed how Internazionale full-back Giacinto Facchetti regularly used to get forward to score goals and thought I could do the same from a central defensive position. As a *libero* I had the whole field in front of me and could step into midfield whenever I saw fit. There was a risk of being caught on the counter, but it was outweighed by the extra man it gave us in the middle of the park. The concept of the attacking *libero* suited me down to the ground. As a kid I was a striker and had an attacker's blood.

You competed in your second World Cup in Mexico in 1970, a tournament much maligned for the heat and altitude. What were your personal feelings about it?
I have to say that Mexico was a wonderful World Cup. I played in three and Mexico was, from the point of view of the people and the games, the best. It was not so successful for me personally because the Germans were third, but everybody was very happy and Mexico was a wonderful host. OK, there were altitude and heat problems but everybody had to play in the same conditions so there was no advantage or disadvantage.

Was your long-term association with Bayern Munich written in the stars?
Bayern was my destiny. When, aged 13, my team 1906 Munich closed its junior team, many of us were expected to join the 1860 club, which was founded in my quarter of Munich in Giesing. But in one of my last games for 1906 I was involved in a clash with an opponent from 1860 and because of that I decided to join Bayern instead.

You played in the US with Pele during the New York Cosmos' greatest era. When you came out of retirement to play for them again in 1983, the NASL was in decline...
Maybe that was the reason they asked me to come back, to do something positive to help. My personal contribution was to play well, to show the fans what I could do at the age of 37. Obviously I couldn't play like I could ten years earlier – I didn't run so much with the ball, I had more experience, giving long balls, bringing my team-mates into good positions and taking the chance to go forward and work a scoring chance. It was not necessary for me to score myself – I was happy to create a chance for someone else to score.

How did US soccer compare with Europe?
You cannot compare, because each country has a different mentality, a different style. And US and German soccer was far apart. But the standard in the US was not as bad as people thought. They had good teams and they played under difficult and different conditions. In Europe you have nice grass fields and people understand the game. In the US you had Astroturf and you had to travel a lot. In five months you had to play over 40 games.

Is football today better than in your era?
I'm not one to say everything was better in the

good old days. For me, the game is not better or worse today, just different. I don't think there's any doubt the game is quicker and more athletic these days; there's not as much space to work in and less time on the ball. Mentalities have evolved. In the 1960s and '70s we always looked to go forward and took the shortest route to goal. Now it's different. The emphasis is on keeping possession.

Which players of the past 50 years have you most admired?

Two factors encouraged me to sign for the New York Cosmos back in 1977. The first was an unforgettable helicopter ride over the Big Apple skyline, which the Cosmos management treated me to. The second was the chance to play alongside Pele who has to rate as the best player of all time. He had ten times as much skill as ordinary footballers, was unselfish and was a tremendous team leader. Brazil's World Cup-winning side of 1970 will never be matched and he was at the heart of it. All the great players, like Pele and Bobby Charlton, always have time for people. Pele would sign autographs for hours and always be kind to people. He was always the perfect gentleman.

O Profesor

Mario Zagallo, the Brazilian "Professor" who won four World Cups as a player, manager and assistant coach

Words: Tim Vickery

The man they called "the little ant" was able to move mountains – which is why the death of Mario Zagallo at the age of 92 was greeted with such sadness in Brazil, with three days of national mourning declared.

It is worth dwelling on where Brazil stood when Zagallo made his international debut against Paraguay in May of 1958. They were third in their own continent, behind Argentina and Uruguay, and were not considered among the favourites for the following month's World Cup in Sweden. Almost 27, Zagallo was in a hurry to change all that. The little left-winger scored twice on debut, was a fundamental part of the team that not only won the Sweden World Cup but the next one in Chile as well, and then was probably even more important as coach of the Mexico 1970 team.

Just over 12 years after he became an international player Brazil were recognised all across the planet as the stylish kings of the global game, the country that everyone wanted to be for a month every four years. Pele, of course, was the magnificent poster boy for this extraordinary rise, but the contribution of Mario Zagallo was arguably at least as vital – albeit far less glamorous. The stars shine when the collective balance of the side is correct and, as a player and as a coach, Zagallo was a symbol of the successful quest to balance the joy of attack with the needs of the defence.

His career, and his thinking about the game, were shaped by the move to a back four which Brazil was pioneering in the 1950s, looking for a way to react to the trauma of losing the 1950 World Cup on home soil to Uruguay, when a teenage Zagallo was on duty during his military service.

An extra player was withdrawn to the heart of the defence to provide cover. With two wingers and a pair of strikers, this left only two men to patrol the open spaces of the midfield. This was clearly a problem for Brazil on their tour to Europe in 1956. They lost 4-2 to England, with 41-year-old Stanley Matthews given acres to send in his crosses from the right wing. This is the situation that Zagallo was brought on to avoid. Originally a number ten, he quickly realised that he had no chance of getting into the Brazil side in that position. So, he moved to the left wing. Brazil had more talented wingers – Pepe with his cannonball shot and Canhoteiro with his elusive dribbling – but Zagallo offered something extra: the capacity to work back and make the extra man in midfield. In the 1958 final against hosts Sweden he scored a goal, crossed for Pele to score and cleared a ball off Brazil's goal-line.

This double function was even more important in Chile four years later. Brazil sent essentially the same side, which was ageing. Pele, at the peak of his powers, was injured in the second match and played no further part in the tournament. The side was creaking, but the up and down industry of Zagallo made sure that they remained competitive. And so, Brazil had two titles to their name.

World Cup hero... Zagallo watches on during the 1970 World Cup final

State funeral... Zagallo's coffin is carried through the streets of Rio de Janeiro before his burial

Zagallo's role may not have attracted a great deal of public attention, but he was a hero to coaches, who looked at his versatility and saw the future. Alf Ramsey never gave Brazil any credit for the way that he lined up his 4-4-2 team in 1966, but it is clear that he went for a Zagallo on either flank. Alan Ball and Martin Peters could do the work of wingers, but they could also funnel back into midfield and provide a platform for Bobby Charlton.

By this time, Zagallo could sense which way the wind was blowing. The only two defeats he suffered as a Brazil player came near the end, on a 1963 European tour. A 5-1 thrashing by Belgium stood out. As he had led, so others were following, and the consequence was a more disputed game with less space in midfield.

All of this influenced his thinking when, at short notice, he took charge of the national team for Mexico 1970. A young coach with relatively limited experience, he was not first in the queue when Joao Saldanha was sacked with three months to go. But if others dithered and dallied, he had no doubts. Full of brio, packed with confidence, he charged into the ring with one certainty. There would be changes. The team he inherited was still playing an attacking version of 4-2-4 that he had helped Brazil move away from 12 years earlier.

> Pele, of course, was the magnificent poster boy for Brazil's extraordinary rise, but the contribution of Mario Zagallo was arguably at least as vital – albeit far less glamorous

"I didn't accept the idea of 4-2-4," he said. "We had to move forwards."

Inside Brazil and especially outside, Zagallo never received the credit that he deserved for his work with that team. A conception exists that the side had so much talent that all the coach had to do was hand out the shirts and enjoy the spectacle; it is foolishly romantic. The stars shone because the team clicked collectively. If it all looked easy, that is because a lot of hard and intelligent work went on behind the scenes.

Zagallo was not keen on his centre-backs, so he dropped midfielder Piazza to the heart of the defence to provide more quality – thus opening up space for the youthful talent and lungpower of Clodoaldo in midfield. The left-winger also went out, replaced by Rivelino who had been on the bench. He would act as a kind of false winger, an adaptation of the role that Zagallo himself had carried out.

"We played in a block," said Zagallo, "compact, leaving only Tostao up front. Jairzinho, Pele and Rivelino all tracked back to join Gerson and Clodoaldo in midfield. I'm happy to see the team in terms of 4-5-1. We brought our team back behind the line of the ball. We didn't want to give the Europeans space to hit us with quick counter-attacks. Our method of defending was to position ourselves

in zones, cover the space. So we saved our energy, dropped back and then when we won possession the technical quality of our team stood out."

Ahead of its time, Zagallo's system worked to perfection. Man for man, it is doubtful that Brazil were as good in 1970 as they were in 1958. But they clicked so well – and had the benefit of TV coverage – that they are the team that is remembered, the bar by which other teams are measured and usually found wanting. Mario Zagallo had hit the heights, and he was only 38.

The descent from Olympus was probably inevitable, and had its negative side. Zagallo did not cover himself in glory in the next World Cup, where he seemed to disrespect the Netherlands before the semi-final and paid the price, with his team resorting to brutal fouls as they went down to a deserved defeat. It could be argued that he was part of a footballing culture that fell into the trap of success. Where the Brazilian game had been extremely open-minded, it now turned on itself, with Zagallo repeatedly expressing the belief that his country's success gave them little need to look elsewhere for ideas. It was a strange point of view, given that the coach who had most influence on his playing career was Flamengo's Fleitas Solich, a Paraguayan.

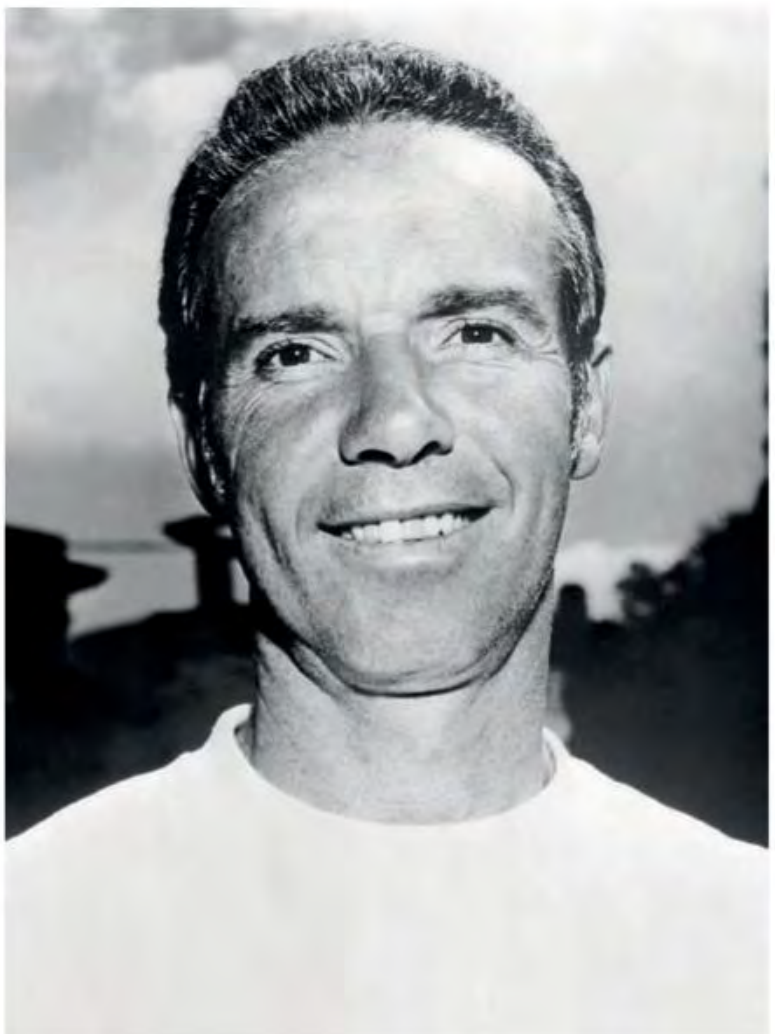
But this excess of nationalistic zeal was the flip side of an adorable characteristic for which he was increasingly identified in the second half of his life: a limitless, unconditional love for the Brazilian national team. Where he had once been known for the cool logic of his tactical thinking, he now stood out through his burning passion for the yellow shirt.

He played a vital role as assistant coach to the fourth World Cup win in 1994, backing up his old friend Carlos Alberto Parreira and ferociously defending the team against an aggressive Brazilian media who were far from convinced of victory. Parreira then stood down, and Zagallo took charge once more for the four-year cycle leading up to France '98, winning the Copa America in 1997 along the way.

Away from the pitch he could bear the dapper air of the bank clerk that he might well have been were it not for football. But having aged rapidly (something that Pele sometimes cited as a justification for not going into coaching), he could give the appearance of being on the run from an OAP's home as he stood on the touchline in his tracksuit. He was still an excellent motivator, and his players from that era recall him with great affection, but it was not quite enough to land World Cup number five. And so, as assistant to Perreira once more, he had one last try in 2006.

It was a bad way to end. This was the worst of his World Cups. The team was top heavy with over-indulged stars – Ronaldinho, Kaka, Ronaldo, Adriano – and lacked balance, the very quality that had been Zagallo's trademark in Brazil's glory years. They won four matches unconvincingly, before being knocked out by a Zinedine Zidane-inspired France in the quarter-finals.

It was the eighth World Cup he had been involved in as a player, manager or assistant. His record of four medals leaves an unrivalled legacy that will never be forgotten in his country of birth.



World Cup portrait... Mario Zagallo at the 1970 World Cup

South American champions...Zagallo lifts the 1997 Copa America trophy

eye witness

Mike Plastow reports

JAPAN

J. League ready for kick-off

Reigning champions Vissel Kobe and their ambitious owner are the team to beat in 2024

Contenders ...Yokohama F. Marinos (L) and Kawasaki Frontale (R) will compete once again for the J. League crown

Vissel Kobe made history in 2023 by winning their first-ever J. League championship. That success brought the title back to the Kansai region for the first time since Gamba Osaka won their second crown in 2014, and at long last out of Kanagawa Prefecture after six years of domination by Kawasaki Frontale and Yokohama F. Marinos. After 20 years of searching, it was Kobe's first serious step towards achieving Rakuten CEO Hiroshi Mikitani's proclaimed goal of building Asia's strongest football club.

The 2024 season kicks off in late February with 2022 champions Yokohama, last year's eventual runners-up, still best placed to challenge Kobe. Kawasaki, too, despite last season's disappointing mid-table finish, may be ready to surge back after making a batch of promising new foreign signings. While Yokohama and Kawasaki will also continue their rivalry in the 2023-24 Asian Champions League, Kobe must wait until the 2024-25 competition begins in the second half of the season to resume their own Asian challenge.

Kobe manager Takayuki Yoshida, now in his third term at the helm, embodies the new Kobe-Yokohama rivalry, having joined Yokohama Flugels as a player out of high school in 1995. When Flugels collapsed in 1998 and merged with Marinos (Flugels is the "F" in Yokohama F. Marinos) the young forward was one of the chosen few kept on in the newly-combined squad. He eventually enjoyed two spells at F. Marinos before joining Kobe in 2008 for his final six seasons as a player.

Last year's triumph was achieved on the base of a sea change under Yoshida from the Barcelona-style short-passing, high-possession football to swift, defensively tighter counter-attacking play. They shed most of their foreign stars, including Andres Iniesta, and won the title with a core of Japanese veterans. That shift has continued during the break with most of the club's remaining foreigners leaving, including Juan Mata, who signed rather mysteriously in the middle of last season and only played ten minutes in the league against Sanfrecce Hiroshima in September. Kobe have made no new foreign signings and the last foreigners standing are two useful Brazilians, defender Matheus Thuler and striker Jean Patric.

Kobe have, conversely, made a number of solid Japanese additions,

New arrival...Harry Kewell has been appointed coach of Yokohama F. Marinos

Holders...Vissel Kobe striker Yuya Osako attacks the ball during last season

including Kobe-born defender Takuya Iwanami, who started out at Vissel from 2011 to 2017 and now returns to his old club from Urawa Reds. Kobe have also signed experienced midfielder and dead-ball specialist Rikuto Hirose from Kashima Antlers, goalkeeper Powell Obinna Obi from F. Marinos, and promising 23-year-old striker Taisei Miyashiro from Kawasaki, one of the latest in a long line of Kawasaki youth products who was with the club from the U12s. Midfielder Yosuke Ideguchi, who played on loan at Avispa Fukuoka last season, has been signed from Celtic.

The contrast could hardly be greater at Yokohama, where the Brazilian strike force of Anderson Lopes – joint-top scorer with Kobe's Yuya Osako last year on 22 goals – Elber and Yan Matheus have all renewed their contracts, as have South Korea attacking midfielder Nam Tae-hee and influential Brazilian defender Eduardo.

Yokohama start the new season under former Liverpool and Australia player Harry Kewell. They are standing firmly by the attacking philosophy of Ange Postecoglou and Kevin Muscat – who now takes over at the Chinese Super League champions, Shanghai Port – in appointing Kewell as their third straight Australian manager. Kewell's managerial experience has all been in the lower divisions of English football, starting with Crawley Town in 2017, but he worked together with Postecoglou on the Celtic coaching staff and is thus, like Muscat, a direct heir to Yokohama's Postecoglou tradition.

"Ange Postecoglou always talked about how wonderful the J. League was," said Kewell in his inaugural press conference, "and he always said to me, if you ever have an opportunity, you should take it and work over here.

"The football the Marinos have been playing in the past few years is a very attacking style, very high energy, possession-based, [fast] reaction to losing the ball. None of these things are going to change; they are just

J. LEAGUE 2024

VISSEL KOBE
Coach: Takayuki Yoshida Prefecture: Hyogo
Kobe won their first league title last season with a core of Japanese veterans, including Yuya Osako, Yoshinori Muto, Hotaru Yamaguchi and Gotoku Sakai. Yoshida's triumphant post-Iniesta team is targeting further successes in Japan and Asia this year.

YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS
Coach: Harry Kewell Prefecture: Kanagawa
The J. League champions under Ange Postecoglou in 2019 and Kevin Muscat in 2022 have appointed Harry Kewell as their third Australian manager in a row to lead them back to the top after last year's runners-up finish.

SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA
Coach: Michael Skibbe Prefecture: Hiroshima
Three-time champions Sanfrecce have not won the league since 2015, but consecutive third place finishes in 2022 and 2023 have put the *Viola* firmly back in the picture. Journeyman German coach Skibbe now starts his third year at the helm.

URAWA RED DIAMONDS
Coach: Per-Mathias Hogmo Prefecture: Saitama
The defending Asian champions faced an early exit from the current AFC Champions League campaign in December and have been suspended from the 2024 Emperor's Cup due to crowd trouble. For new manager Hogmo, 2024 is all about league success.

KASHIMA ANTLERS
Coach: Ranko Popovic Prefecture: Ibaraki
Eight-time champions Kashima have not won the J. League since 2016 but also have never finished lower than fifth since then. New coach Popovic knows Japanese football inside out after spells at Oita Trinita, Machida Zelvia (twice), FC Tokyo and Cerezo Osaka.

NAGOYA GRAMPUS
Coach: Kenta Hasegawa Prefecture: Aichi
Champions in 2010 and Emperor's Cup winners back in 1995 under Arsene Wenger. Real title contenders at the halfway point last season, only to collapse with just four wins in their last 17 matches. Hasegawa now needs all of his vast experience to turn things around.

AVISPA FUKUOKA
Coach: Shigetoshi Hasebe Prefecture: Fukuoka
2023 was a special year for Avispa: they achieved their highest-ever league finish (seventh), won their first major trophy (the J. League Cup), and reached the Emperor's Cup semi-finals. The big question for 2024 is how high this relatively low-budget club can go.

KAWASAKI FRONTALE
Coach: Toru Oniki Prefecture: Kanagawa
Frontale have slipped from their pedestal after winning the J. League four times in five years from 2017 to 2021, but last year's Emperor's Cup triumph and strong Asian Champions League form in 2023-24 has confirmed they remain powerful title contenders.

CEREZO OSAKA
Coach: Akio Kogiku Prefecture: Osaka
Shinji Kagawa made a crowd-pleasing return to his boyhood club last year and played every league match. An attractive, upper mid-table club, they have been something of a cup team in recent years and also won the J. League's Fair Play Prize last season.

ALBIREX NIIGATA
Coach: Rikizo Matsuhashi Prefecture: Niigata
The upset-minded 2022 J2 champions largely kept their squad together last season and secured a solid mid-table finish. The encouraging record included wins against Yokohama F. Marinos, Kawasaki Frontale and Sanfrecce Hiroshima (twice), plus a draw in Kobe.

going to alter slightly with a slight different touch from an Aussie. I am looking forward to continuing the work that the Marinos have put in over the last five or six years and bringing my own gold dust on top of it."

Kawasaki, seeking now to build on last year's Emperor's Cup success and return to winning ways, have also turned to Brazil with the signings of forward Erison from Botafogo and midfielders Patrick Verhon from Bahia and Ze Ricardo from Tombense. Erison replaces Leandro Damiao, the J. League's joint-top goalscorer and Player of the Year in 2021. Damiao was a huge factor in Frontale's title successes of 2020 and 2021, but struggled badly with injury last season and is set to join Malaysia Super League side Kuala Lumpur City. Brazilian defender Jesiel and winger Marcinho have both renewed.

Aside from the injuries, Kawasaki's other big headache of recent years has been the drain of Japanese players abroad due, in large part, to their extraordinary success. Kawasaki have already given the world such players as Kaoru Mitoma, Ao Tanaka, Reo Hatate, Hidemasa Morita and Shogo Taniguchi. World Cup 2022 defender Miki Yamane has now joined the exodus with a move to LA Galaxy in MLS. Defenders Kyohei Noborizato and Kazuya Yamamura have also left, to Cerezo Osaka and F. Marinos, respectively, as well as Miyashiro to Kobe, but other key players such as midfielder Yasuto Wakizaka and captain Kento Tachibanada have remained.

Exciting arrival... Ola Solbakken has joined Urawa Reds on loan from Roma

Sanfrecce Hiroshima, third now for two seasons in a row, have made no remarkable new signings, so continuity will be the theme for Michael Skibbe's third year in charge.

In contrast, fourth-placed Urawa Reds make another fresh start following the departure of manager Maciej Skorza after only one year at the club. Skorza led Urawa to last year's AFC Champions League triumph, but the team was running out of ideas by the end of the season and failed to make it

Fourth-placed Urawa Reds make another fresh start following the departure of manager Maciej Skorza after only one year at the club

Rebuild...Urawa Red Diamonds are ready to bounce back from a disappointing end to 2023

out of the group stage in defending their Asian crown. Skorza is replaced by the former Norway and BK Hacken manager, Per-Mathias Hogmo.

Urawa have also lost Guinea striker Jose Kante, who chose to retire at the relatively young age of 33. He scored his last goal for Reds in the third-place play-off at the Club World Cup and had positioned the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations as his farewell tournament.

Reds have brought in substantial reinforcements in the shape of Hacken captain and Sweden midfielder Samuel Gustafson; Norway winger Ola Solbakken, on loan from Roma; and Brazilian forward Thiago Santana, the stand-out goalscorer for the past three seasons at Shimizu S-Pulse. At the back, superb central defenders Marius Hoibraten and Alexander Scholz have both renewed for the new season. This Urawa team should again be very hard to beat.

Kashima Antlers have appointed Serbian manager Ranko Popovic to take over from Daiki Iwamasa, who now moves to Vietnamese top-flight club Hanoi, and also brought in Brazilian winger Guilherme Parede on loan from Argentine outfit Talleres. In addition, Kashima have a rising Japanese star in Kaishu Sano, whom Popovic previously coached at Machida Zelvia. The versatile 23-year-old defensive midfielder joined Kashima from Machida last year and made his Japan national team debut in the World Cup qualifier against Myanmar in November. Sano also made substitute appearances in two of Japan's 2023 Asian Cup group-stage games in January, victories over Vietnam and Indonesia.

In other developments, the J. League Cup, which has largely been contested only by first division teams in its 32-year history (starting in 1992, making it older than the J. League itself), switches from a group-stage format to a straight knockout for all 60 J. League clubs from the new season. The league, too, has been streamlined into three divisions of 20 clubs.

Looking further ahead, the J. League will follow the AFC Champions League in switching from a calendar-year season to an August kick-off from 2026-27 for better alignment with the international schedule. This reversion – Japanese football switched to the calendar year when the J. League began – was resisted for a long time in large part because of the severe winters of northern Japan. Allowances will be made by instituting a winter break from mid-December to mid-February and arranging for affected clubs to play away during the most difficult periods. This still leaves them with the problem of how and where to train during the season of deep snows. The work of ironing out the details will continue.

Rising star...Kashima Antlers midfielder Kaishu Sano was recently capped by Japan

FC TOKYO
Coach:* *Peter Cklamovski* *Prefecture:* *Tokyo
Australian manager Cklamovski will be expected to lead Tokyo higher this year after taking over in the middle of last season. The capital city's biggest club has plenty of talent and huge support, but still has never won the J. League title.

HOKKAIDO CONSADOLE SAPPORO
Coach:* *Mihailo Petrovic* *Prefecture:* *Hokkaido
Sapporo have occupied tenth to 12th spot in the league table for the last five seasons but there is never any shortage of thrills and spills. They were the third-highest scorers in J1 last year, a figure only marred by the joint-most goals conceded.

KYOTO SANGA
Coach:* *Cho Kwi-jae* *Prefecture:* *Kyoto
The J. League's oldest club, founded back in 1922, barely survived in 2022 on their return to J1 after a decade away but looked more settled last season. Cho is a master at bringing out the best at a small club after a decade of bouncing between J1 and J2 at Shonan Bellmare.

SAGAN TOSU
Coach:* *Kenta Kawai* *Prefecture:* *Saga
Financially embattled Tosu continue to perform miracles on and off the pitch as the J. League's most consistent overachievers. They start their 13th consecutive season in J1 as the only club promoted from J2 never to have been relegated.

SHONAN BELLMARE
Coach:* *Satoshi Yamaguchi* *Prefecture:* *Kanagawa
Famous as the club of Japanese legend Hidetoshi Nakata (when they were known as Bellmare Hiratsuka), Shonan spent much of last year in the bottom two. But their lively brinksmanship never fails to entertain and they survived again to secure a seventh straight season in J1.

GAMBA OSAKA
Coach:* *Dani Poyatos* *Prefecture:* *Osaka
J. League champions in 2005 and 2014, and second as recently as 2020, Gamba have struggled for the past three campaigns and were fortunate to avoid relegation last year. Spanish coach Poyatos has a lot to prove in his second year in charge.

KASHIWA REYSOL
Coach:* *Masami Ihara* *Prefecture:* *Chiba
Japan legend Ihara, Samurai Blue's fourth most capped player of all time, took over from Nelsinho midway through last season and just kept the team up. But Reysol, champions in 2011 and the club of current Japan striker Mao Hosoya, will hope to go much higher this year.

MACHIDA ZELVIA
Coach:* *Go Kuroda* *Prefecture:* *Tokyo
Tokyo's newest J1 club led from the front under Kuroda, a high school coach for 28 years until his appointment last season, to finish 12 points clear of Jubilo Iwata and Tokyo Verdy at the top of J2. For Machida, a city in Tokyo's western suburbs, 2024 is a dream come true.

JUBILO IWATA
Coach:* *Akinobu Yokouchi* *Prefecture:* *Shizuoka
Jubilo's glory years of three league titles and three second places between 1997 and 2003 are far behind them and they have bounced between J1 and J2 since 2013. Yokouchi coached the Olympic team and at Jubilo, too, is focused on young player development.

TOKYO VERDY
Coach:* *HiroshiJofuku* *Prefecture:* *Tokyo
Winners of the first two titles after the J. League's formation (in 1993 and 1994) as Verdy Kawasaki, Verdy return to J1 after 15 years in J2. With three Tokyo teams playing in J1 for the first time, 2024 will be the biggest year ever for club football in the Japanese capital.

eyewitness

Samindra Kunti reports

PALESTINE

'Hey, Palestine is here'

The story of a beleaguered nation's journey at this year's Asian Cup

At the 2023 Asian Cup, Palestine won their first-ever match in the continental finals by defeating Hong Kong 3-0. That victory, which followed a draw with the United Arab Emirates, ensured Palestine's passage to the last 16. This achievement was even more significant because of what the national team represented: a symbol of hope and resilience for Gazans, Palestinians and the diaspora around the world.

In Qatar, Palestine and their supporters were on ▸

Tribute...Palestine's players observe a minute's silence to remember the victims of the Gaza conflict

"Free Palestine"...fans unfurl a giant Palestine flag during the team's first game against Iran

an emotional roller coaster. After the victory against Hong Kong, centre-back Mohammed Saleh kneeled, prayed, and wept. He had fought back tears during the match, but when asked by the press corps if he thought news of the qualification would reach Gaza, the number five broke down: "I hope my family knows..."

Saleh was one of three players in the squad with family in Gaza. Yaser Hamed's family hails from Beit Hanoun in northern Gaza. He said: "The entire team is so emotional about this because we achieved something that has never happened in history. They are celebrating the qualification. I think we made all the millions of Palestinians around the world happy. For us, the most important thing is to make the Palestinian people happy. At this moment too many people are suffering so this is for them."

Among the players, a sense of relief was tangible – stress and anxiety had not prevented the team from writing history. Mohammed Rashid, who plies his trade for Bali United in Indonesia, added: "This win is going to give us some room to breathe. It will remove a lot of stress and frustration from every player. I think we needed this. We need to lose some pressure. This gives another push to the suffering Palestinian people. At the same time, when you win it's an amazing feeling."

Rashid's words summarised the difficulty players experienced when balancing contrasting emotions. They were playing at a continental finals, the pinnacle of any player's career, and succeeded in reaching the knockout rounds – all while carrying the burden of representing a nation battered by war.

Home support...the family of Palestine captain Musab Al Battat watch the team face Qatar from their family home in the West Bank

The Palestine team encounters struggles that few national sides around the world must contend with. Hamed, 26, remembers very well one of the first times he featured for Palestine in 2019. Everything was new and at times intimidating. Israeli immigration officials at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport interrogated him for hours with acerbic and aggressive

Playing for the shirt... Palestine centre-back Mohammed Saleh

questions. "We were under major pressure," recalled Hamed. "The questions! 'Do you want to engage with Hamas?'"

Four years later, Hamed, born in Spain to a Palestinian father, got his first taste of tournament football in Doha. Among the players, Gaza was a constant concern and topic of conversation. The Palestinian team does not avail of a psychologist. Although the players were not told to reduce their social media use, they tried to shy away from the constant barrage of devastating news at home. "All players talk about the situation in Palestine," said Hamed. "It's impossible to not talk about that. I was following it every day, everything. For my head, I can't do that anymore. I am sad. My family sends me videos. It is hard to see that. I have my routine every day to clear my head. I listen to music and read books about self-improvement. That's how I forget everything."

After their Asian Cup curtain-raiser against Iran, Saleh said: "I couldn't reach my family for two days. They must have been displaced, because my house was destroyed. It is in a rural area in Gaza. I play for our cause, for Gaza. I was raised in Gaza, played football on the beach of Gaza, and played football in the Yarmouk Stadium – which the Israeli army has turned into a prison. My friends are imprisoned at this stadium."

In many ways, it was a miracle that Palestine – the Mandatory Palestine Football Federation was founded in 1928 and the current team was recognised in 1998 by FIFA and the football fraternity under Sepp Blatter – has a team at the Asian Cup at all. Three of the players called up for the national team – Ibrahim Abuimeir, Khalid Al Nabrisi and Ahmed Kullab – could not be extracted from Gaza. Despite the roadblocks and the increasingly dangerous security situation in the West Bank, the Palestinian FA succeeded in cobbling a squad together.

Yet 14 out of the 26 players selected for the tournament played for domestic clubs and, with the league suspended, the players lacked match fitness.

Palestine travelled to Algeria and Saudi Arabia for training camps, two regional nations that immediately offered support. They defeated USM Annaba 3-2, drew with Algeria's Under-23 team and Saudi Arabia, and lost 1-0 to Uzbekistan.

Ahead of their opening game, the team stood shoulder to shoulder and sang the national anthem *Fida'i* in a spine-tingling rendition. For months, they had been waiting for this moment: the chance to represent Palestine at the Asian Cup. They had never imagined that another war in Gaza would come on top of the decades of oppression and destruction in Palestine.

"Everything the national anthem represents, it's like I need to give my 100 per cent to defend the country, to fly our flag high," said Hamed. "We represent all Palestinians around the world. Listening, I feel like we are defending our country. What's happening in Gaza right now, it's crazy."

At the Education City Stadium in Al Rayyan against Iran, Hamed and the team enjoyed widespread support from fans who immediately adopted Palestine as their second team. In unison, they chanted "Free Palestine", a sharp contrast with the moment of silence observed for what the stadium PA described in the AFC's non-political messaging as "the on-going situation in Palestine".

"There will come a time that we, in football, will be sorry that no proper statements were made," observed Susan Shalabi, vice-president of the Palestinian FA.

> "I couldn't reach my family for two days. They must have been displaced, because my house was destroyed"
>
> Palestine centre-back Mohammed Saleh

In the stands, politics were omnipresent. Iran's pro-regime supporters who yelled: "Death to Israel" were met with silence by the other fans. Iran is accused of supporting Hamas, the terror group behind the October 7 attacks. At Palestine's second group match, support went crescendo, with fans booing every touch of the United Arab Emirates because the country has normalised its relationship with Israel, while a banner in the stands read: "Don't normalise genocide". Yet the support best reflected the prevailing sentiment in the Arab world.

On the pitch, Palestine were overzealous and overwhelmed by nerves in the first game, conceding twice within the first 12 minutes against the Iranians. Their defence at fault each time, it was all too easy for the three-time champions, who pinged the ball around en route to a 4-1 victory, reflecting the gulf in class and resources between both sides. In the second half, Iran had the luxury of introducing Roma striker Sardar Azmoun, who wrapped up victory with a 55th-minute strike.

It was the worst possible start to their campaign in what Hamed called "a match to forget". Palestine were in danger of disintegrating. Showing greater focus, the players picked themselves up to rally to a 1-1 draw against ten-man United Arab Emirates. The Emirati went into the lead via a header from 19-year-old striker Sultan Adil, but Palestine drew level through an own goal by Bader Nasser, a deserved equaliser. Under Tunisian head coach Makram Daboub, Palestine became more attacking, exuding greater confidence in their own abilities.

In their final group game against the tournament's lowest-ranked team, Hong Kong, Palestine delivered the win – courtesy of a double by striker Oday Dabbagh and a Zeid Qunbar header – and an historic qualification for the last 16 where host nation and defending champions Qatar, spearheaded by Akram Afif, proved too strong.

Palestine bowed out in style, demonstrating resilience, dignity and sporting excellence in a campaign that transcended the game and offered a message of peace and hope. Astutely, Hamed concluded: "We can put our voice up in the world. Like, hey, Palestine is here. All people deserve a good life, to be free, and to wake up as equals. You know, all Palestinian lives matter."

Emotional...midfielder Mohammed Rashid (L) is consoled after the last-16 defeat to Qatar

Triumphant...Iraq supporters celebrate their team's 2007 Asian Cup success

AGAINST ALL ODDS

Iraq's victory at the 2007 Asian Cup, against the backdrop of war and sectarian violence at home, remains one of the most remarkable sporting stories in the continent's history, writes **John Duerden**

When George Bush took time out of whatever he was doing as US President to pay tribute to the winners of the Asian Cup, then you knew that something special had happened. So it was back in 2007. There has never been a bigger story in Asian football than Iraq becoming champions for the first and – to date – only time.

In terms of the talent that the Lions of Mesopotamia had at their disposal, it wasn't a huge shock. Iraq had long had good players, first appearing at the World Cup in 1986. Their Under-20s won the Asian Youth Championship in 2000 and, with many of the same players, the Under-23s reached the last four at the 2004 Olympics – beaten to the bronze medal by an Italy team featuring Andrea Pirlo, Giorgio Chiellini and Daniele De Rossi. Three years later, much of the squad that went to Athens was ready to take on the rest of Asia at senior level.

Nevertheless, heading into the finals – co-hosted by the Southeast Asian quartet of Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand – there was little cohesion, confidence or camaraderie.

Even before the US-led invasion in 2003, the country's sporting infrastructure had been driven to breaking point by United Nations-imposed sanctions following the first Gulf War in the early 1990s. Forced into a nomadic existence, the national team didn't play at home between July 2002 and July 2009.

Asian champions...Iraq captain and 2007 Player of the Tournament Younis Mahmoud lifts the trophy

When Saddam Hussein was ousted, violence and chaos ensued. The long-standing dictator was part of the Sunni Muslim minority that controlled the country in which the majority of the population were Shia Muslims. His deposition – and later execution – was seen by the Kurds to the north as a chance to achieve their dream of independence and break free of Baghdad's control.

If the country was divided, the same sectarian fault lines could be felt in the team; winger Hawar Mohammed was criticised by some of his fellow Kurds for being photographed in an Iraqi flag before the tournament.

Federation president Hussain Saeed insisted otherwise: "We don't know who is Sunni and who is Shia in our team or among the fans, and we don't care," he declared.

Whether or not the players were divided by sectarianism, they could not escape its consequences. Team physio Anwar Jassim was the victim of a car bomb on his way to a pre-tournament training camp in Jordan, goalkeeper Noor Sabri lost his brother-in-law in the days leading up to the tournament, and Mohammed's stepmother was killed just before the quarter-final clash with Vietnam. "The shadow of violence hung over the Iraqis throughout the tournament," wrote Michael Church in the September 2007 edition of *World Soccer*.

In football terms, there were issues also. Manager Jorvan Vieira was given the job as head coach just weeks ahead of the Asian Cup kick-off. It was seen as an underwhelming appointment because that is exactly what it was. The Brazilian had been coaching for almost three decades, but while his CV was full of Middle Eastern and North African posts, he had never stayed at one place long. Two warm-up games in South Korea failed to lift the gloom, with a 3-0 loss to the hosts followed by a 2-0 defeat against Uzbekistan.

There were reports of the federation wanting to replace the entire team with their Under-23 counterparts and then, as the team looked off the pace in the build-up, get rid of their new coach before he could really get started. It was too late on both counts.

Matters did not improve as the team touched down in Thailand. "Two of our players were detained for eight hours by immigration officials," said Vieira. "I discovered we didn't have equipment to train with or even kit. We had problems with the food, the hotel booking. It was a nightmare." Nobody was talking about Iraq as potential champions.

Iraqi icon...Younis Mahmoud celebrates after scoring the winner in the final

Instead, Australia – then the Asian Football Confederation's newest members, having left Oceania a year earlier – were regarded as favourites. The Socceroos were still flying high from the 2006 World Cup, where they progressed from their group and were only beaten by eventual winners Italy in the second round courtesy of a controversial 95th-minute penalty. With a squad packed full of big names from the Premier League, Serie A and the Bundesliga, they were Iraq's second opponents in Group A.

But first came Thailand. On a sultry Friday evening, the co-hosts took an early lead from the penalty spot before a Younis Mahmoud header earned Iraq a point. It was a decent one but there was much work to do.

Nicknamed the Desert Fox, Younis was a powerful striker and a big personality, a natural choice as team captain. He spoke to this writer before it all started, contacted through his own personal website in those pre-social media days. If that was unusual, his declaration that he wanted to play in Europe was not and, later, there was reported interest from Sunderland and Blackburn Rovers and rejected

Inspiring... Iraq supporters celebrate in the streets of Baghdad

bids from Lens and Lyon. Then playing for Qatari outfit Al Gharafa, he saw the tournament as a great chance to show what he could do, but that was the extent of his ambition. Leading the team to the title was a fanciful notion.

He didn't get on the score sheet in the next game, a result that shocked Asia, the players, the coach and millions back home. Australia had been lucky in the opening game to get a point against Oman, a last-minute Tim Cahill strike earning a 1-1 draw. It was seen as a wake-up call for the Everton star and his Premier League team-mates, Harry Kewell, Mark Viduka and Mark Schwarzer, to get into gear.

Yet Iraq ended up winning 3-1 in a result that changed everything. It not only showed an overconfident Australia that Asia should not be taken for granted, it gave Iraq belief. It also meant that a 0-0 draw in the final group game with Oman was enough to earn top spot, a stay in Bangkok and a meeting with Vietnam in the quarter-final. After a routine 2-0 win, with two more goals for Mahmoud, the semi-finals beckoned.

Vieira, who knew that failure to get out of the group would have resulted in his rapid dismissal, could now relax a little. Getting to the last four meant that he had bettered Iraq's three previous attempts, when they reached the quarter-finals. Previously, the country's best-ever showing was fourth, but that was back in 1976 when there were just six participants and the only victory came against South Yemen.

Facing South Korea in the semi-finals 31 years later was a much bigger deal. The pressure was off, with the East Asians, World Cup semi-finalists just five years earlier, expected to win. Yet the Taegeuk Warriors arrived in Kuala Lumpur without really impressing. Premier League stars Park Ji-sung and Lee Young-pyo were absent. Under Pim Verbeek, the Dutch assistant to Guus Hiddink in 2002, Korea lacked creativity and had scored just three goals in the previous four games, negotiating the quarter-final against Iran with a penalty-shootout victory after 120 goalless minutes.

The semi-final was not a great spectacle but what it lacked in finesse, it made up for in tension. It became apparent early in the second half that extra-time was on the agenda and early in extra-time, penalties loomed large. Iraq goalkeeper Sabri made the vital save to give his team a 4-3 shootout win and a final against Saudi Arabia.

It was a famous triumph and widely celebrated back home – but even that brought tragedy. Two suicide bombers targeted the gathering crowds in Baghdad, with over 50 people estimated to be killed. There were also deaths as people shot automatic weapons into the air in celebration, forcing the US military helicopters to suspend their regular patrol. "It's very sad," Vieira said. "We changed Iraq's history, and then these senseless killings happened. If we lose, people get killed. If we win, people still get killed."

The squad, feeling responsibility for the atrocities through their success, even discussed pulling out of the competition. The decision was taken to stay, to try to deliver some good news for the people of Iraq, and to show the world a different face of the war-torn country – for a little while at least.

"We want to unite the people behind the team, whatever group they belong to," said Sabri. Vieira revealed there had been a meeting until the early hours of the morning led by Younis. "The players said: 'If we win, there will be more killing; if we lose there will be more killing; and if we pull out there will be more killing. At least if we stay on and win, we might be able to bring some happiness into people's lives.' And we did."

> "The players said: 'If we win, there will be more killing; if we lose there will be more killing; and if we pull out there will be more killing"
>
> Iraq's 2007 Asian Cup-winning head coach Jorvan Vieira

The likes of Nashat Akram and Mohammed caught the eye of viewers and scouts, as did the team's talisman and star, Younis. But tragedy was never far away; on the morning of the final, seven people in the captain's home city of Kirkuk were killed by gunmen.

Far away in Jakarta, the mood was very different on the streets. On the short walk from the hotel down to the Gelora Bung Karno Stadium, it was clear that, while there were not many Iraqis around, the locals would be supporting Iraq. There was a celebratory atmosphere in the humid air of the Indonesian capital and little doubt that almost everyone in the 60,000-crowd wanted to see the underdogs triumph.

For the Saudis, this was their sixth final in seven tournaments, pursuing a record fourth title. An undisputed continental powerhouse, they were widely expected to swiftly bring an end to the Iraqi dream.

In truth, it wasn't a great game, ultimately decided by a second-half corner that was sent over by Mohammed and headed home by – who else – Younis, taking him joint-top of the tournament's scoring charts. Iraq hung on and the rest is football history.

Vieira didn't last much longer and was soon resuming his journeyman career, though had another spell in charge of Iraq. The same heights were never reached again but he had already had the kind of triumph that few coaches would get to experience even once.

For understandable security reasons, the homecoming from Jakarta was very low-key. The players met the prime minister behind closed doors in Baghdad while Younis, worried for his safety, did not even attend.

Later that year, the striker made history as the first and only Iraqi to be included in the Ballon d'Or shortlist, and finished third in the Asian Player of the Year awards, but it was not enough to earn the move to Europe he'd dreamed of. He played for a host of Qatari clubs before returning to Iraq in 2015, retiring a year later.

Younis remains his country's most capped player, and its third-highest goalscorer. But his glorious exploits in 2007 are the reason that he – and his team-mates – will never be forgotten.

Shootout hero... Iraq goalkeeper Noor Sabri after the semi-final

Journeyman ...Iraq coach Jorvan Vieira

Girona

Spain's great entertainers are benefitting from careful planning as they continue to maintain their shock La Liga title charge

La Liga's entertainers... Girona players celebrate another winning goal

Girona's remarkable ascent to the top of La Liga didn't start with a bang but a commendable draw, against Real Sociedad on the opening day. Still, it proved a steady foundation on which to breed a purple patch that few thought would last but soon became thrilling, title-winning form, leaving usual suspects Real Madrid and Barcelona with an unexpected challenger for the crown.

This century, only Atletico Madrid and Valencia (champions twice each) have beaten Barcelona and Real Madrid to the top prize. Meanwhile, Girona have generally found themselves two tiers lower – an irrelevance to the elite sides chasing glory. Before this surge, the club's best-ever finish was tenth in La Liga, which they achieved last year.

Central to Girona's heady climb has been Aleix Garcia, the former Manchester City youngster, who springs attacks from the base of the midfield with raking passes. Meanwhile, Brazilian bright spark Savio hugs the touchline, powering forward, turning defenders inside-out and delivering decisive crosses into the penalty box.

There has been a strong Ukrainian influence, too. Viktor Tsygankov is a smooth operator that lines up on the opposite wing to Savio, while striker Artem Dovbyk is a robust leader of the line and an effective goalscorer.

Mastermind...Girona head coach Michel

Under their head coach, Michel, overachieving Girona are easy on the eye in pursuit of victories. It's a fluid style, with precise passes through the lines and, crucially, bodies piling forward to score – often in clinical fashion before their jubilant fans at the Estadi Montilivi.

If there's one criticism, it's a leaky back line, but that comes with the territory when playing such an expansive game. They make up for it at the other end too, the first team in the league to pass 50 goals for the season, and often scoring four goals or more in individual matches – including in victories over Barcelona and Atletico Madrid. It's been the antithesis to Carlo Ancelotti's Real Madrid, the most likely threat to their dreams, who grind out results and

keep the defence tight when not performing at full tilt.

Girona's approach is in keeping with Michel's previous work at Rayo Vallecano – where he remains a hero after a long career – and Huesca. In both cases, he achieved promotion before eventually losing his job while fighting relegation, but the style remained the same. Huesca had a soft underbelly but, despite the results, Girona's board saw a team that liked to play and felt Michel perfectly fitted the bill. They hired him in July 2021, six months after he was sacked by Huesca, and he led the Catalan club to promotion in his first season.

It is not an entirely romantic tale. Far from plucky underdogs, Girona are part-owned by the Abu Dhabi-backed City Football Group (CFG), with close links to Manchester City. The club chairman is Pere Guardiola (brother of Pep), first-team regulars Garcia, Yangel Herrera and Eric Garcia are all former City players, and Brazilian right-back Yan Couto is one of many loanees to have joined from the English champions.

Still, it would be wrong to see Girona simply as an extension of City. Their rise has been fuelled less by glitzy signings and world-class training facilities, and more by a clear sporting strategy and shrewd squad planning. Every club in La Liga has an agreed salary cap at the start of the season, and Girona's figure of €52 million places them 13th in the league, almost €700m behind Real Madrid's budget.

For all the players' qualities, they are not wildly expensive commodities. Record signing Dovbyk cost £6.5m last summer. Paolo Gazzaniga, a middle-of-the-road goalkeeper in the Premier League, is trusted between the sticks. Daley Blind, with his best days seemingly behind him, has become a regular at no cost. Unfancied at Barcelona, loan defender Eric Garcia is a starter, while captain Cristhian Stuani, formerly of Middlesbrough, has been at the club since 2017.

Equally, they cannot always afford to keep their best players. Last season's top scorer, Taty Castellanos, a loan signing from New York City FC, joined Lazio in the summer, while Oriol Romeu and Santiago Bueno, first-team regulars in 2022-23, left for Barcelona and Wolves respectively.

Savio is the clearest example of the club utilising its CFG resources. On paper, he is on loan from Troyes, but he has never kicked a ball for the French club. It is an arrangement that only works because the two clubs have the same owners with bigger aims and ambitions.

Overachieving Girona are easy on the eye in pursuit of victories. It's a fluid style, with precise passes through the lines and bodies piling forward to score

For now, the symbiosis between the CFG setup – specifically meticulous research and access to talented players easily transferrable between CFG clubs – and the Guardiola family's brains have laid the foundations.

There is little doubt that Girona are currently the most remarkable project in the CFG portfolio. City's dominance in England has become the norm and the group's other European clubs – Lommel SK, Troyes and Palermo – all play in the second tier, while projects in America, India, Japan and Australia have brought trophies but not dominance.

For Girona, there has been incredible momentum, even a sense of destiny. That's not to say Michel's men will win it all. Champions League qualification in itself would still be a significant achievement. Regardless, moments like their captivating 4-3 win over Atletico Madrid, where Ivan Martin's strike seemed to float inevitably towards the top corner in the closing stages, makes you wonder whether this was part of a script, their moment in history finally carved out.

As for the supporters watching inside the intimate Montilivi, where the average attendance is less than 13,000 – higher only than Getafe's – it doesn't get much sweeter. For an enterprise whose primary goal is to stay amongst the top 20 in Spain, these are giddy heights when one reflects on Girona's history of yo-yoing between the leagues and only reaching the top flight for the first time in 2017.

It would be easy to get carried away, so Michel's main job is keeping his and the players' feet on the ground, as he puts it. And that may be the key. Girona has the strategy; now it's about their mentality as the competition heats up.

Henry Flynn

In the script...Ivan Martin watches his match-winning goal against Atletico Madrid go in

Ventforet Kofu

Japanese second-tier side advance to Asian Champions League knockout rounds with a second-string team

Into the second round...Ventforet Kofu's players celebrate after topping their group

J League second-division club Ventforet Kofu have lived the Asian dream since lifting the Emperor's Cup (Japan's FA Cup) in 2022. Nobody gave them much chance when that win qualified them for the 2023-24 Asian Champions League, but they have since defied the odds by winning their group and becoming the first-ever J2 club to advance to the knockout stage. In the last 16, they were drawn against South Korean champions Ulsan HD.

Ventforet's dream commenced with a spectacular Emperor's Cup run in 2022 under former manager Tatsuma Yoshida. They wound up 18th in the second division that season but claimed five consecutive top-flight scalps on the way to winning their first major trophy, including Sanfrecce Hiroshima in the final. Ventforet also put up a strong showing in the 2023 season-opener at the National Stadium, a 2-1 Super Cup defeat to the 2022 J. League champions Yohokama F. Marinos, but that should have been the end of the fairy tale.

It was not. Instead, 2023 was a season of great highs and lows for Ventforet. In the league, they challenged strongly for promotion, only to face final-day heartbreak when two late goals by Montedio Yamagata denied them a place in the play-offs. But in the Asian Champions League, it was a very different story.

The manager... Yoshiyuki Shinoda

Kofu is a provincial city located in a mountain basin north of Mount Fuji, about 90 minutes by express train from Tokyo. The club has no big corporate sponsor but is financed jointly by a large number of small local companies. Though based in Kofu, it regards the whole of Yamanashi Prefecture as its home. The Kofu Basin – ferociously hot in summer and icy in winter – has long been known for its wine rather than its football. Until the Emperor's Cup success, Kofu's biggest claim to football greatness was as the birthplace of Hidetoshi Nakata, the first Asian player to be nominated for the Ballon d'Or.

The name, Ventforet, is sort of French but echoes the Wind-Forest-Fire-Mountain (*Furinkazan*) banner of an indomitable 16th century Yamanashi warlord, Takeda Shingen.

It represents four core concepts of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*: "An army must be as swift as the wind, as flexible as the forest, as fierce as fire, as immovable as a mountain." The slogan also works for the tight, swift, counter-attacking style played under current manager Yoshiyuki Shinoda.

Ventforet stepped onto the national stage as founding members of the second division in 1999, only to finish bottom three times in a row in their first three league seasons. They have made it to the top flight three times since then, for a combined eight seasons, never finishing higher than 13th, but haven't been back since relegation in 2017.

Ventforet enjoyed the luck of the draw in the 2023-24 Asian Champions League by avoiding the South Korean clubs in the group stage. Even so, Australian champions Melbourne City, Thai champions Buriram United and Zhejiang, third in the 2022 Chinese Super League, must have also been pleased not to face any top-flight Japanese opponent.

Shinoda was perfectly clear that promotion was the club's primary goal and decided from the start to save his best players for the league. The team he fielded in Melbourne for the Champions League opener in September included only two regular first-team starters. Melbourne could have been forgiven for complacency but, 18 Kofu shots later, looked glad to have escaped with a 0-0 draw.

The Kofu B-team was fresh and hungry, and continued to play with the same sparkle and verve all through the group stage. The truth may be that Japan's second division squads have many players of about the same quality. Phrased differently, in a squad of essentially second-rank players, it made little difference who played. Either way, they were all highly motivated to play.

Kofu hosted all of their Champions League home games at the National Stadium in Tokyo, and this, too, was a masterstroke for stoking up excitement. Fans of other clubs, too, were inspired by the dream and organised to cheer them on. Nobody really expected Kofu to win, but there was nothing lose.

Kofu next defeated Buriram 1-0 on October 4. First-team attacker Motoki Hasegawa, who had not even made the trip to Melbourne, came off the bench to net the 90th-minute winner. Ventforet lost the third match 2-0 in China but replied with a 4-1 victory against Zhejiang in the return in Tokyo two weeks later. In the process, striker Peter Utaka became the oldest-ever AFC Champions League goalscorer at 39 years old.

Shinoda was perfectly clear that promotion was the club's primary goal and decided from the start to save his best players for the league

The excitement was maintained in a 3-3 draw against Melbourne in Tokyo, and Ventforet then clinched top spot with a 3-2 win at Buriram in front of 500 travelling supporters. After just one goal in their first three Champions League games, Ventforet netted ten in their next three. The last two matches came after the end of the J2 season and Shinoda did make more use of first-team players, but largely stayed loyal to the players who had brought the team this far.

The Champions League run has changed the way the club is viewed, not only in Kofu but across Japan. As well as fans of other clubs tuning in, national team manager Hajime Moriyasu has been paying attention, calling up full-back Sota Miura for his Japan debut. Opposition scouts were also watching, with Miura (Kawasaki Frontale), Hasegawa (Albirex Niigata), and winger Shion Inoue (Nagoya Grampus) among the players to be snapped up by top-flight clubs. But, as their Champions League run proved, Ventforet's B-team are ready to step up.

By the time you read this, they may already have been knocked out by the mighty Ulsan. Just days after their last-16 second-leg tie in late February, the 2024 J2 League campaign begins against Tokushima Vortis, the club now managed by Yoshida. Shinoda, ahead of his second season at Ventforet, is clear of his priorities. "Our first target is promotion," said the manager.

Mike Plastow

Record breaker ...Peter Utaka celebrates after becoming the AFC Champions League's oldest-ever goalscorer

Andriy Shevchenko

Ukraine's record goalscorer and former manager becomes president of the country's Football Association

New challenges require decisive solutions, especially if the country is experiencing a war on an unprecedented scale in the 21st century. In Ukraine, football reforms will now be carried out by Andriy Shevchenko.

At the extraordinary XXVI Congress of the Ukrainian Football Association (UAF), the former player and coach, who has the status of a legend in his country, was unanimously elected president of the organisation.

It would hardly have been possible to imagine a more difficult time for Shevchenko to receive the keys to the main football office in Ukraine. The Football House itself in Kyiv, where the elections were held, resembled a well-protected fortress in which numerous signs indicated to the 94 delegates how to quickly go down to the bomb shelter at the first air raid signal.

And this is the reality in which Ukrainians have been surviving for almost two years. Two days before the elections, the Lokomotiv sports complex was destroyed as a result of a missile attack on Kyiv. The facilities, where 500 children were taught football, can no longer be used. Shevchenko himself was there not long ago to speak with the latest generation of promising talents. To date, 353 sports facilities have been damaged by bombing in Ukraine and 24 football clubs have been forced to stop their activities.

Shevchenko knows first-hand about the horrors of war. In the first days, his mother and sister witnessed the bombing of Ukraine's capital: "What I felt then cannot be expressed in words. There was emptiness and hopelessness in my soul, but at the same time, the belief that we would defend our independence and freedom."

At the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Shevchenko became the first ambassador of the charitable fundraising platform United24, established by the country's president Volodymyr Zelensky. He immediately got involved in raising funds for refugees in dire need of humanitarian, medical and food assistance. "We are one people and one country," said Shevchenko.

Unanimously elected...Shevchenko is announced as president of the Ukrainian Football Association

"At one of the most difficult moments in the history of Ukraine, I had to do everything to help my people."

Zelensky praised his efforts: "Andriy has enormous influence, which he achieved through his hard work and his sporting achievements. He directed all his authority to increase international assistance to our state."

With the help of Arsenal's Oleksandr Zinchenko, Shevchenko also organised a charity match in London last August with all funds raised going to the restoration of the Lyceum in the village of Mykhailo-Kotsyubynske.

"About 100 people were hiding in the school during air raids, a third of whom were children. One day, as a result of shelling, the roof collapsed, the teacher died, there were wounded. When Shevchenko found out about this, he immediately came to the rescue," said Lyceum director Mykola Shpak.

> "The war directly affects football, we have stagnation"
>
> New UAF president Andriy Shevchenko

Ukraine legend... Shevchenko scored a record 48 goals in 111 appearances

Shevchenko, remains confident that the one who does not give up always wins: "The war directly affects football, we have stagnation; the low level of the championship, the inability to invite strong foreign players, complicated international prospects and the outflow of talented children.

"But there is an example of a country that has successfully overcome this challenge: Croatia, which faced a mass exodus of children in the 1990s when the war began. I talked with my friend Zvonimir Boban, who was involved in solving these problems. And he is ready to help us."

Shevchenko is a winner by nature, and, like in his playing days, now finds himself in the right place at the right time: "Even during the war, we need not only to hold on to what we have, but also to move forward, set high and ambitious goals. I thank all Ukrainians for the support that I have felt for many years. In return, I will do everything to make Ukrainian football stronger and give a reason to be proud."

Oleg Zadernovsky

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2023-24

KNOCKOUT ROUND PREVIEW

Turn over now for Nick Bidwell's comprehensive team-by-team guide

REAL MADRID

For only the third time in the current iteration of the Champions League (dating from 2003-04), Real proved pitch perfect in the group stage, winning all six of their matches in a pool that comprised Italian champions Napoli, Portuguese upstarts Braga and German surprise packages Union Berlin. Not that *Los Blancos* will have any grounds for complacency. On the two other occasions when they gained maximum points (2011-12 and 2014-15), first round full houses did not translate into silverware, beaten at the semi-final stage by Bayern Munich and Juventus respectively. Should Real collect their 15th Champions League crown, coach Carlo Ancelotti will deserve a substantial bonus. ACL injuries to goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois and centre-backs Eder Militao and David Alaba have stripped bare the team's defensive options and the Italian will have to be at his most ingenious to plug the gaps. Heaven forbid anything untoward should happen to goalscoring tyros Jude Bellingham, Vinicius Junior and Rodrygo, where finding adequate replacements would prove far more difficult.

Strong display...Lois Openda gave Leipzig a two-goal lead in Manchester

RB LEIPZIG

Undoubtedly aided by a favourable draw – giving them the opportunity to devour the limited Red Star Belgrade and Young Boys – Leipzig had no problem qualifying as Group G runners-up behind runaway table-toppers Manchester City. A last-16 tie versus the mighty Real Madrid will be a huge challenge for Marco Rose's side, but they will take heart from their strong performances in defeat to City in the autumn. For long periods in both games, they more than held their own and, after taking a two-goal lead early on at the Etihad Stadium, arguably deserved better than the wrong end of a 3-2 final scoreline. For a team that underwent heavy reconstruction in the off-season, RB have made remarkable progress on the collective front. According to head coach Rose, the only missing ingredient is a more pronounced killer instinct. The return to fitness of goalkeeper Peter Gulacsi, stopper Willi Orban and winger Dani Olmo is a real boost, as is the €20 million arrival from Napoli of clever North Macedonian playmaker Eljif Elmas.

Real Madrid proved pitch perfect in the group stage, winning all six of their matches

Real Madrid's goalscoring tyro ...Jude Bellingham

Fortress...Copenhagen's Parken Stadium was a tough place to go in the group stage

FC COPENHAGEN

The Danish Superliga champions are not exactly continental heavyweights – only twice have they qualified for the knockout stages of the Champions League (this campaign and back in 2010-11 when they lost to Chelsea in the last 16). Expertly led and marshalled by coach Jacob Neestrup, they had to claw, scrap and forage their way through Group A. Their over-achieving progress centred on a heroic goalless draw in Munich against Bayern – the first time the Bavarians had suffered a goalscoring blank in 26 home games in the competition – and a stunning 4-3 home win over Manchester United, albeit aided by Marcus Rashford's red card shortly before half-time. Usually lining up in a compact 4-5-1 system, Copenhagen are effective counter-attackers, relying on the wiles of Mohamed Elyounoussi and Roony Bardghji on the wings and flair for goals of midfielder Lukas Lerager.

MANCHESTER CITY

After securing an historic treble last campaign, including their first-ever Champions League title, something of a drop-off in standards was always on the cards. Once you touch base in heaven, thoughts of dynasty-building do not matter quite so much and City certainly seem to have lost a degree of focus in the Premier League, culpable of conceding a glut of late goals. That said, their work in the opening phase of this season's Champions League was exemplary, winning all six of their ties, scoring, on average, three goals per game. The freshly crowned world champions remain a formidable force and will be that much stronger in the second half of the campaign with playmaker Kevin De Bruyne and striker extraordinaire Erling Haaland fit and firing again after spells out injured.

Returning to fitness...Erling Haaland was joint-top scorer in the group stage

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

PSG barely gave the impression of a continental juggernaut in the group phase, middling to mediocre in their performance, mustering just eight points (two wins, two draws and two losses) and only gaining the second qualifying slot in Group F thanks to a superior head-to-head goal difference over Milan. PSG chairman Nasser Al Khelaifi recently waxed lyrical about coach Luis Enrique, describing the Spaniard as the "best coach in the world". Some might call such praise a blatant case of over-egging the pudding; for the most part, the Parisians have failed to convince this season, only rarely functioning as a unit, short of intensity in away games and lacking in precision when going for goal. In the 1-1 Champions League draw at home to Newcastle in November they had 31 shots of which only seven were on target. The attacking brilliance of Kylian Mbappe can paper over many of the cracks, but not all.

Misfiring...PSG failed to impress in the group stage

REAL SOCIEDAD

Paris Saint-Germain would be well advised not to take the San Sebastian outfit lightly when the pair go head-to-head. While PSG were clearly relieved to avoid the likes of Manchester City, Bayern Munich and Real Madrid, the Basques represent anything but easy meat. As they proved in winning a tough Group D – also featuring Internazionale, Benfica and Red Bull Salzburg – *La Real* are formidable competitors, defensively organised to the nth degree and ever ready to go about their business at full throttle, the sort of rabid high tempo that many opponents cannot live with. Under coach Imanol Alguacil, at the helm since December 2018, the men in blue-and-white stripes overflow with belief, hunger and pride. Often fielding as many as seven homegrown players, they have only reached the knockout phase of the Champions League on one other occasion, back in the spring of 2004.

Formidable competitors... Real Sociedad

Under coach Imanol Alguacil, at the helm since December 2018, the men in blue-and-white stripes overflow with belief, hunger and pride

LAZIO

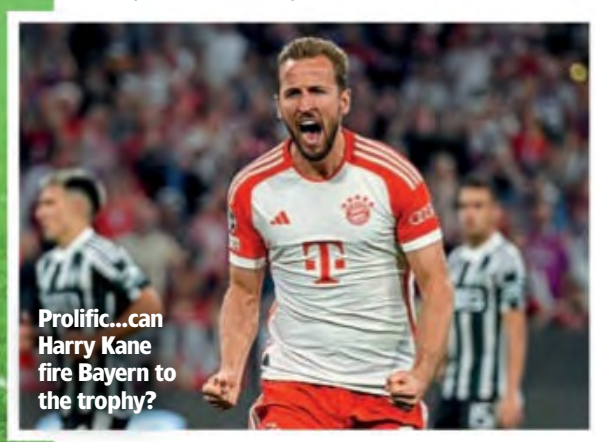
Lazio boss Maurizio Sarri likes to tell it as it is. In the wake of his side's qualification for the Champions League last 16 – finishing second in Group E to Atletico Madrid – Sarri, never one to shy away from a heartfelt opinion, thought it a good idea to suggest that his team was not coping well with their multi-competition commitments and that, at the highest level, the mentality of his players left a little to be desired.

Super skipper... Ciro Immobile has three Champions League goals in 2023-24

He was referring specifically to the events of matchday 6, a 2-0 defeat at Atletico. Sarri admitted that the *Biancocelesti* had not been ruthless enough, wasting four good chances and at fault for both Atletico's goals. Lazio have regressed since clinching the runners-up spot in last season's Serie A. They badly miss the Serbian midfielder Sergej Milinkovic-Savic, who moved to the Saudi Pro League last summer, most of their new signings have flopped and, mysteriously, their ferocious pressing game has gone AWOL.

BAYERN MUNICH

No one would have been surprised to see the Bavarian giants dominate Group A, remaining unbeaten and only dropping two points (in a goalless home draw with FC Copenhagen). Bayern have not lost in 40 Champions League group stage matches – a run stretching back to 2017 – and have now topped their pool six seasons in a row. Ultimately though, Bayern only judge a European campaign on what they achieve in the knockout rounds and they will be aware that in the last three years they have come up short, dumped out at the quarter-final stage by PSG, Villarreal and Manchester City. This is precisely the reason why Thomas Tuchel, a European champion with Chelsea in 2021, was hired; either they go deep into the competition or face the consequences. As prolific as ever in his first season at the club, Harry Kane is their ace in the hole, though many have legitimate concerns about the squad's strength in depth, particularly at right-back, central defence and in defensive midfield. Is Eric Dier, recently acquired from Spurs, the answer?



Prolific...can Harry Kane fire Bayern to the trophy?

ATLETICO MADRID

This time last year, much of the discussion around Atletico was the future of Diego Simeone, with the long-serving head coach seemingly coming to the end of his time in Madrid. Yet not only did the Argentine stay, he seems to have gained a new outlook. Once exclusively regarded as a defensive-minded coach, more warrior king of a battle-hardened private army than football manager, Simeone has released the handbrake this term. The *Colchoneros* topped Group E unbeaten with plenty of style and attacking intent, their goal tally of 17 bettered only by Manchester City. With Antoine Griezmann and Alvaro Morata regularly on the scoresheet, Atleti have one of the most potent forward lines in Europe. What will bother old-school Atletico followers is their current defensive frailty, an uncharacteristic lack of concentration and aggression. Simeone's side used to be masters of the art of stifling, harassing and intimidating – not so much anymore.

Potent partnership... Alvaro Morata and Antoine Griezmann

Inter's star man... Lautaro Martinez

With Antoine Griezmann and Alvaro Morata regularly on the scoresheet, Atletico Madrid have one of the most potent forward lines in Europe

INTERNAZIONALE

Last season's losing Champions League finalists are the loaded gun that could go off at any moment. Give the *Nerazzurri* enough space in open field and they will take full advantage, punishing the unwary with the devastating speed of wing-back Denzel Dumfries and twin strikers Lautaro Martinez and Marcus Thuram, not to mention the midfield guile of Hakan Calhanoglu and Nicolo Barella. Inter, meticulously prepared by coach Simone Inzaghi, are quite brilliant on the counter-attack and it's no coincidence they carry more threat away from home, pragmatic defensively, but quick, direct and decisive when sparking into offensive action. In six Champions League away games last season, they lost only one (2-0 at Bayern Munich in the group phase) and they have been equally intransigent on their travels in this year's competition, drawing at Real Sociedad and Benfica and winning in Salzburg. One snag: Inzaghi's top priority this term is the Serie A title, so Europe may take a back seat.

In form and firing...PSV

PSV

Back in the knockout stage of the Champions League for the first time since 2016, PSV will be encouraged by the bulk of their performances in group combat last autumn. A 4-0 thumping at Arsenal on matchday 1 would destabilise many a team, but the side coached by Peter Bosz are made of stern stuff and did not lose again in Group B, repeatedly proving their mettle with late goals. PSV have certainly been enjoying themselves on the domestic front this campaign, winning all 16 of their Eredivisie fixtures prior to the winter break, and they have no end of in-form players: United States full-back Sergino Dest (currently on loan from Barcelona), evergreen target man Luuk de Jong, incisive Belgium winger Johan Bakayoko and midfielder and skipper Joey Veerman. The latter recently caused a stir by reportedly turning down a contract extension, and could soon be on his way to the Premier League. Which club he joins may well depend on how far he can lead his team in Europe. Certainly, a last-16 showdown with a floundering Dortmund outfit will hold no fears for the runaway Eredivisie leaders.

BORUSSIA DORTMUND

These are nervous and confusing times at the Westfalenstadion, where Dortmund have led a mysterious double life this term. Good enough to seal first place in a Champions League "Group of Death", notably beating Newcastle home and away and winning 3-1 at Milan's San Siro, yet markedly off the pace in the Bundesliga. They only recorded one victory in the last eight games before the winter break and picked up just one point from nine in heavyweight encounters against Bayern Munich, Bayer Leverkusen and RB Leipzig. In a rare occurrence of the boo-boys coming out to play, Dortmund fans have been showing their displeasure of late and rumours abound that coach Edin Terzic is on thin ice.

Under pressure... Dortmund boss Edin Terzic

ARSENAL

In the North London club's first Champions League odyssey in six long years, Mikel Arteta's young side made light of their inexperience at this level to win Group B. Only in one fixture (the 2-1 defeat in Lens) did they let themselves down and generally fired on all cylinders, outplaying and outthinking the opposition. Their outstanding defensive triumvirate of centre-backs Gabriel and William Saliba behind midfield holder Declan Rice is the sort of foundation that a serious Champions League challenge can be built on. Conversely, outstanding wingers Bukayo Saka and Gabriel Martinelli are a twofold cause for concern: opponents, mindful of the pair's importance to Arsenal, are successfully doubling up on them and, in a worrying development, both youngsters appear to be running on fumes. They must not be run into the ground. Another big concern for Arteta is his side's profligacy in front of goal, something that the Gunners failed to address with a new signing in the January window.

The outstanding triumvirate of Gabriel and William Saliba behind Declan Rice is the sort of foundation that a serious Champions League challenge can be built on

Champions League contenders... Arsenal

PORTO

Speaking in terms of economic power, Porto vice-president Vitor Baia calls his side's last-16 clash with Arsenal "an unequal fight". However, Baia, who won the Champions League with the Dragons in 2003-04, knows only too well that his club are anything but naive no-hopers on the European scene. Over the last decade, they have reached the knockout stages of the Champions League on no fewer than seven occasions and three times have progressed to the quarter-finals. Porto could definitely use a big European scalp to distract from their troubles of late: the announcement of €47.6m losses last season and bitter internal wrangling about the future of long-time club president Jorge Nuno Pinto da Costa. Porto, who finished second in their qualifying group behind Barcelona, will be especially looking to Brazilian winger Galeno – the standout forward in the group stage with four goals and four assists – to turn on the style against Arsenal.

Wing wizard... Porto's Galeno shone in the group stage

BARCELONA

Despite finishing atop Group H, there were still widespread calls for Xavi's head, leading to the announcement that he will step down as Barca coach in the summer. Lauded as the Camp Nou saviour after steering the side to the La Liga title last year, Xavi came under attack from all quarters for a string of poor results in all competitions, tactical deficiencies and a tendency to deploy players out of position. Defeats in the Champions League to such minnows as Shakhtar Donetsk and Antwerp were embarrassing indeed, light years from the glory of Xavi's playing day. In fairness, a crippling injury list – with Pedri, Frenkie de Jong, Robert Lewandowski, Raphinha and Jules Kounde all missing for periods this season – has not helped, and they certainly could have done without the long-term absence of young midfield maestro Gavi, who tore cruciate ligaments in November while on international duty. They must do better defensively too. The news that keeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen is available again after back surgery should aid the process.

Set to leave this summer... Barcelona coach Xavi

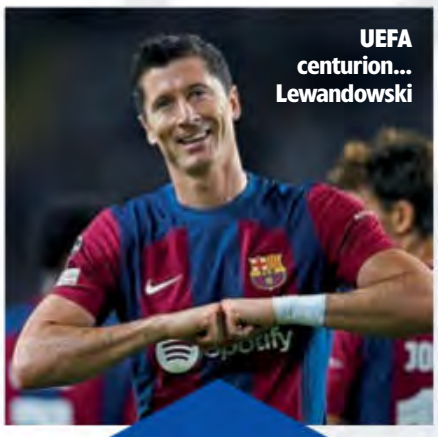
NAPOLI

Napoli made the cut easily enough for the knockout phase, seeing off Braga and Union Berlin to seal qualification in Group C behind Real Madrid, but few fans are optimistic of further progress. After running away with the Serie A title last campaign, playing some of the most attractive football in Europe, the Neapolitans have clearly lost their way, with the summer departure of inspirational coach Luciano Spalletti provoking an almost immediate degradation, the sophisticated pressing schemes, dynamism and audacious attacking play giving way to a miserable one-dimensional approach. So far this term, two coaches (Frenchman Rudi Garcia and current incumbent Walter Mazzarri) have palpably failed, while rumours surrounding the future of star striker Victor Osimhen are not helping matters. Nonetheless, Barca cannot afford to underestimate the Italians in their last-16 head-to-head.

Uncertain future...Napoli striker Victor Osimhen

THE NUMBERS GAME

The best facts and stats from this season's Champions League…


UEFA centurion… Lewandowski

100

During the group stage, Robert Lewandowski became the third player (after Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi) to score 100 goals in UEFA club competitions.

22

Lazio's Mattia Zaccagni was fouled 22 times in the group stage, more than any other player, drawing a foul roughly every 18 minutes.

18

Manchester City were the top-scoring team in the group stage, ahead of Atletico Madrid (17), Arsenal and Real Madrid (16).

36.3

Dortmund's Karim Adeyemi was the quickest player of the group stage, clocking a top speed of 36.3 kilometres an hour.

Hot streak…Kylian Mbappe

2

FC Copenhagen advanced through the group stage for the second time in their history. They are the only Danish team to progress from a Champions League group.

40

At the age of 40, Porto defender Pepe became both the oldest player and oldest goalscorer in Champions League history during the group stage.

8

Kylian Mbappe has now scored in each of his last eight Champions League group stage home games for PSG, with a total of 11 goals.

296

Goals scored in the group stage – eight fewer than the 2022-23 season.

Top attacker …Porto's Galeno

16

Barcelona's Lamine Yamal – who was born three years after Pepe's Champions League debut – replaced Celestine Babayaro as the youngest player to ever start a Champions League match.

5

With five goals each, four players are currently leading the race for the Golden Boot – Antoine Griezmann, Erling Haaland, Alvaro Morata and Rasmus Hojlund*.

67%

Two thirds of the goals scored in the group stage came from five passes or fewer.

505

Celtic defender Liam Scales* completed more passes than any other player in the group stage.

TOP ATTACKERS

Player (club)	Goal contributions *(Goals + assists)*
Galeno *(Porto)*	**8** *(4+4)*
Harry **Kane** *(Bayern)*	**7** *(4+3)*
Jude **Bellingham** *(R. Madrid)*	**7** *(4+3)*
Bukayo **Saka** *(Arsenal)*	**7** *(3+4)*
Erling **Haaland** *(Man. City)*	**6** *(5+1)*
Gabriel **Jesus** *(Arsenal)*	**6** *(4+2)*

TOP DRIBBLERS

Player (club)	Dribbles
Khvicha **Kvaratskhelia** *(Napoli)*	**46**
Kylian **Mbappe** *(PSG)*	**44**
Rafael **Leao*** *(Milan)*	**36**
Elias **Achouri** *(Copenhagen)*	**32**
Ander **Barrenetxea** *(Sociedad)*	**30**

TOP PASSERS

Player (club)	Attempted**	Accuracy
Nathan **Ake** *(Man. City)*	**301**	**98.7%**
Ruben **Dias** *(Man. City)*	**468**	**98.1%**
Reiss **Nelson** *(Arsenal)*	**94**	**97.9%**
Toni **Kroos** *(Real Madrid)*	**349**	**97.1%**
Manuel **Akanji** *(Man. City)*	**333**	**97%**

***Minimum of 90 attempted passes*

Goalscoring goalkeeper... Ivan Provedel

4

Lazio's Ivan Provedel became the fourth goalkeeper – after Hans-Jorg Butt, Sinan Bolat and Vincent Enyeama – to score a Champions League goal.

50

Paris Saint-Germain have scored in their last 50 Champions League group stage matches, last drawing a blank in a 1-0 defeat to Real Madrid in November 2015.

53

53 players played every minute of their team's group-stage campaign.

Top dribbler ...Khvicha Kvaratskhelia

91

Real Sociedad committed more fouls than any other team in the group stage, and 16 more than any other side that made it to the knockouts.

7

Champions League holders Manchester City finished top of their group for the seventh consecutive campaign.

31

Red Star Belgrade goalkeeper Omri Glazer* and Young Boys' Anthony Racioppi* were the busiest keepers in the group stage, making 31 saves each.

HEAD-TO-HEADS

FC COPENHAGEN v MANCHESTER CITY

WINS	DRAWS	WINS
0	2	2

City thrashed Copenhagen 5-0 in last season's group stage, but were held to a goalless draw in Denmark

RB LEIPZIG v REAL MADRID

WINS	DRAWS	WINS
1	0	1

Leipzig scored twice in the first 18 minutes en route to beating Real Madrid 3-2 in last season's group stage

LAZIO v BAYERN MUNICH

WINS	DRAWS	WINS
0	0	2

These two met at the same stage of the 2020-21 season, with Bayern winning 6-2 on aggregate

PSG v REAL SOCIEDAD

WINS	DRAWS	WINS
0	0	0

Sociedad were knocked out by French opposition on their last progression to this stage, beaten by Lyon in 2003-04

INTERNAZIONALE v ATLETICO MADRID

WINS	DRAWS	WINS
0	0	1

The only time these two sides have met competitively was in the 2010 UEFA Super Cup, with Atletico winning 2-0

PSV v BORUSSIA DORTMUND

WINS	DRAWS	WINS
1	1	0

The last time these two sides met was in the 2002-03 group stage. Dortmund won 3-1 in Eindhoven, before a 1-1 draw

PORTO v ARSENAL

WINS	DRAWS	WINS
2	1	3

These two met six times in four years, but not since back in 2010. Porto have only won one of their last ten games v English opponents

NAPOLI v BARCELONA

WINS	DRAWS	WINS
0	2	2

Barca knocked Napoli out of the knockout stages of the 2021-22 Europa League and the 2019-20 Champions League

TOP RUNNERS

Player (club)	Distance covered
Rasmus **Falk** *(Copenhagen)*	79.4km
Fredrik **Aursnes*** *(Benfica)*	76km
Mads **Bidstrup*** *(Salzburg)*	75.5km
Joshua **Kimmich** *(Bayern)*	75.1km
Stephen **Eustaquio** *(Porto)*	74.8km
Lukas **Lerager** *(Copenhagen)*	74.8km

TOP KEEPERS

Player (club)	Saves per goal	Clean sheets
Yann **Sommer** *(Inter)*	9.5	3
Alejandro **Remiro** *(Sociedad)*	5.5	4
Nick **Pope*** *(Newcastle)*	5.2	1
Gregor **Kobel** *(Dortmund)*	4.5	3
Jan **Oblak** *(Atletico Madrid)*	4	2

TOP DEFENDERS

Player (team)	Ball recoveries	Tackles won
Mats **Hummels** *(Dortmund)*	57	17
Nicolas **Otamendi*** *(Benfica)*	50	9
Diogo **Leite*** *(Union Berlin)*	49	7
Denis **Vavro** *(Copenhagen)*	48	2
Strahinja **Pavlovic*** *(Salzburg)*	47	9

**Player/team has already been eliminated*

All stats from uefa.com

Ones to watch

Nick Bidwell picks 12 players who could shine in the Europa League knockout stage

Alex BAENA

VILLARREAL

The 22-year-old attacking midfielder or winger, who marked his senior debut for Spain with a goal last autumn, seems to have most bases covered as he looks to clamber up the greasy pole to stardom: slippery as an eel on the ball, dynamism, mobility, an outstanding range of pass, final-ball execution and shooting power.

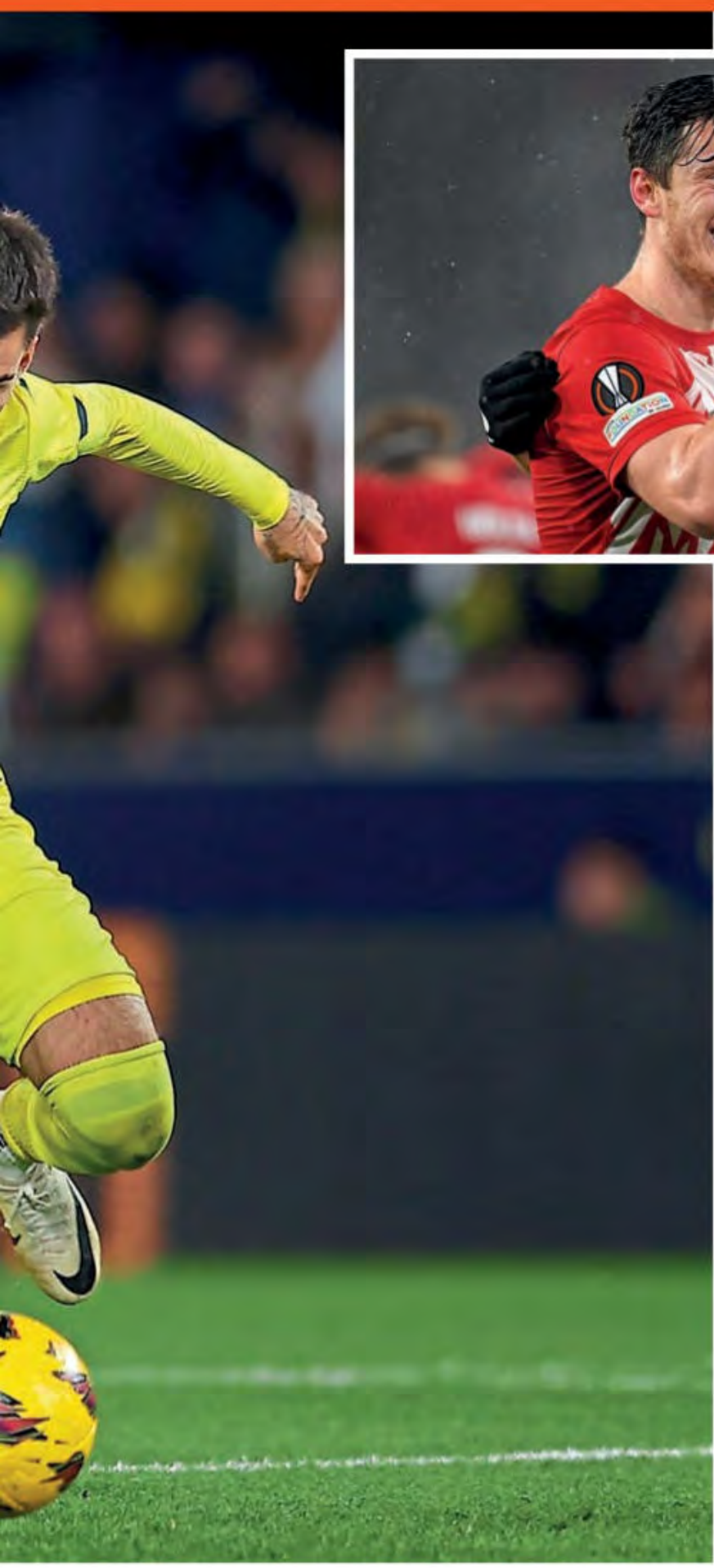
There is, though, one vital phase of the game in which he can often be found wanting: discipline. Regularly confusing will-to-win for recklessness, he was well into double figures for yellow cards in each of the last two seasons and is well on the way to repeating that record again, while in October he was sent off in La Liga when VAR adjudged him to have elbowed Getafe defender Stefan Mitrovic. He came close to another expulsion in a Europa League tie with Rennes, so enveloped by the red mist that his coach hauled him off soon after being booked early in the second half.

Hot-headed ...Alex Baena

Back in autumn, then-Villarreal coach Pacheta – who has since been replaced by Marcelino – told a press conference that in a conversation with Baena, he had pressed the latter to clean up his act. "He's an exceptional player and person," declared Pacheta. "He's had many sending-offs in his career and we want to help him improve this. As a footballer, he's fantastic. Alex uses his bad temper to compete. But controlling one's emotions is what makes a human being."

Baena is on the radar of a number of top Premier League sides

A key member of Spain's Under-21 side that won silver at last summer's European Championship, Baena is reported to be on the radar of a number of top Premier League sides. Barcelona are keen on him



too, though might be too cash-strapped to strike a deal. Under contract with Villarreal until 2028, Baena is subject to a €60 million release clause.

He has been on Villarreal's books since the age of 11 and spent the 2021-22 season on loan at Girona, helping them win promotion to the Spanish top flight, but now he is undoubtedly one of the first names on the Yellow Submarines' team sheet. With two goals and two assists in the Europa League group stage, he was his team's standout star, and will be their automatic go-to man once again as they look for creativity, inspiration and match-winning ability in the knockout rounds.

Hat-trick hero... Michael Gregoritsch

Michael GREGORITSCH
FREIBURG

Highly intelligent forward who burst into Europa League action in November with a fine hat-trick in the 5-0 thumping of Olympiakos. He also made a vital four-goal contribution to Austria's qualification for Euro 2024.

Mojmir CHYTIL
SLAVIA PRAGUE

Rangy Czech national team striker with an instinctive feel for being in the right place at the right time in the penalty box. Renowned for his fancy finishes (backheels and flicks), his physical presence can be a major distraction for defenders.

Jonathan CLAUSS
MARSEILLE

All-action France international right-back, who has been one of the rare five-star performers in a thoroughly inconsistent Marseille. Rumoured to be on the watch-list of Bayern Munich.

Viktor GYOKERES
SPORTING

The Sweden striker has not stopped scoring since leaving English second-tier side Coventry City for Lisbon last summer, piling up the goals in all competitions. His boundless energy is the lifeblood of Sporting's excellent domestic form, while his three goals in Europe fired his club to the play-offs.

Sporting star... Viktor Gyokeres

Pascal GROSS
BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION

Over seven seasons and some 230 games, the versatile and indefatigable German midfielder or full-back has proved worth his weight in gold to the Seagulls. Recently won his first full cap for his country at the grand age of 32.

Arnaud KALIMUENDO
RENNES

Nurtured at PSG's academy, the gifted France U21 striker is being watched at the moment by a host of top German clubs. A move to the Bundesliga is a tempting proposition for him, though Rennes are most unwilling to negotiate.

Ross McCAUSLAND
RANGERS

The young winger from Northern Ireland is enjoying a wonderful breakout season at Ibrox, clearly trusted by Gers coach Philippe Clement, impressing in Europe and banking a League Cup winners' medal. Positive and direct.

Luis MURIEL
ATALANTA

Ageless Colombian attacker who, despite being in his early 30s, continues to be the epitome of lively commitment. Perfectly two-footed, he can operate as a conventional centre-forward, second striker or as a right-winger.

Antonio SILVA
BENFICA

After playing an instrumental role in Benfica's UEFA Youth League victory in 2021-22, the exceptional centre-back stepped straight into the Eagles' first-team back line for last season's league title win – all before his 20th birthday.

Calvin STENGS
FEYENOORD

The hugely talented attacking midfielder has been turning on the style since joining the Rotterdammers from Nice last July. First made a name for himself at AZ Alkmaar and clinched the Belgian league title on loan at Antwerp last campaign.

James WARD-PROWSE
WEST HAM UNITED

The Hammers midfielder is without doubt the Premier League's finest dead-ball specialist. Apart from elevating set-pieces to a work of art, he is industrious and technically solid, contributing four assists in the group stage as West Ham topped their pool.

BAYE
trivo

NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN

Bayer Leverkusen are determined to shake off their tag of perennial runners-up

Words: Nick Bidwell

As Leverkusen set a blistering pace atop the German top flight – remaining unbeaten in their first 18 fixtures to move seven points clear at the summit – older Bundesliga watchers could be excused for experiencing flashbacks to the 1997-98 campaign, when newly-promoted Kaiserslautern defied the odds to scoop the title ahead of perennial champions Bayern Munich.

Then, as now, the narrative is word for word. Everyone expecting Kaiserslautern/Leverkusen to slip up and be overhauled by Bayern, only for the unfancied outsiders to relentlessly maintain their winning momentum. Could we be in for one of those all-too uncommon occurrences in the German elite: Bayern forced to play second fiddle?

Should Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso and his merry men continue to make magic all the way to the finishing line, thus securing their first-ever championship shield, legendary status will be assured. And not only in this corner of the Rhineland; equally euphoric would be the massed ranks of the "anyone but Bayern brigade", the supporters up and down the land who bristle at the Bavarian giants' outrageous dominance and who would dearly love to see more power-sharing.

Little wonder the atmosphere at the BayArena is electric at the moment. Not only is their Bundesliga title tilt in great shape; they have also run riot in the Europa League, winning all six group games. According to the bookmakers, only Liverpool are more likely to lift the trophy than Leverkusen. Their competitive record in the first half of this season (26 matches, 23 wins, three draws, zero losses, 82 goals scored and 18 conceded) is the absolute stuff of dreams. Indeed, no German pro side has ever begun a campaign with such a long unvanquished run.

Not that any Leverkusen fan with a sense of history will be taking anything for granted. Despite an impressive 16 top-four Bundesliga finishes in the last three decades, Leverkusen and trophies have rarely gone together. Since first breaking into the top flight in 1979, they have only claimed silverware on two occasions. In 1988, they sensationally won the UEFA Cup in a final for the ages, recovering from a 3-0 first-leg deficit against Espanyol to turn the tables in the return and eventually win on penalties. In 1993, they lifted the DFB-Pokal Cup courtesy of a 1-0 victory over Hertha Berlin's amateurs.

Over the years, Leverkusen have had to endure the acute pain of several near-misses. Bundesliga runners-up on no fewer than five occasions, as well as finalists in the 2001-02 Champions League – where they were essentially undone by Zinedine Zidane's wonder-volley for Real Madrid – the club known as the *Werkself* (aka the company team of the Bayer pharmaceutical concern) know all about falling at the final hurdle.

Unfortunately for Leverkusen, the "choker" tag has stuck, though it is only partially deserved. In some instances, they simply lost out to superior teams and in truth, most of the "Never-kusen" headlines stem from two end-of-season Bundesliga wipe-outs. On the final day

of the 1999-2000 campaign, needing just a point to secure their first-ever title, they somehow contrived to lose 2-0 at Unterhaching, allowing Bayern Munich to overtake them on the line. A couple of years later, they folded again, a five-point lead at the top of the table with three games to go suddenly evaporating in the heat of a Borussia Dortmund comeback.

Could the Class of 2023-24 suffer a similar loss of nerve at the death? Only time will tell. But on the evidence of the season so far, it's hard to envisage an implosion. Xabi Alonso has built a steamroller of a side, a relentless and indomitable outfit that just oozes belief and hunger.

No Alonso, no party. In his first station as a pro coach, the former Liverpool, Real Madrid, Bayern Munich and Spain midfielder has worked nothing less than a miracle at Leverkusen. On his arrival in the Rhineland back in October 2022, the club were in the emergency room, second-bottom and sinking fast. Dr Alonso, however would soon have them back on their feet again, soaring up the table to finish a highly creditable sixth and reaching the semi-finals of the Europa League.

In an incredibly short space of time, Alonso has improved Leverkusen every which way. As a defensive unit, his three-man back line (Jonathan Tah, Odilon Kossounou and Edmond Tapsoba) is much more disciplined and solid than that of his predecessor Gerardo Seoane. The unforced errors of old have dried up, they are considerably more aggressive in their pressing, no longer dropping into a mid-block out of possession, but seeking to squeeze the opposition as high as possible.

Watching on...Xabi Alonso watches his team in action against Heidenheim

And they are so well organised that they are rarely caught out on the break.

The boys from the BayArena have become more flexible creatively too,

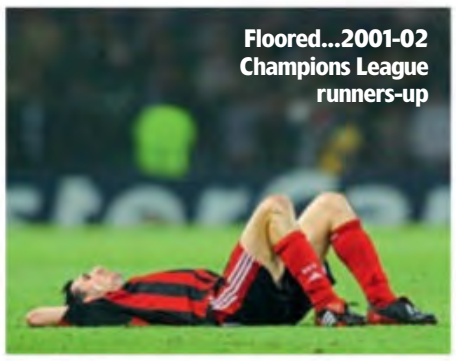
BAYER "NEVER-KUSEN" *1904-2023*

HONOURS

Bundesliga 2 North	UEFA Cup	German Cup	Bundesliga	Champions League
1978-79	*1987-88*	*1992-93* **Runners-up:** *2001-02; 2008-09; 2019-20*	**Runners-up:** *1996-97; 1998-99; 1999-2000; 2001-02; 2010-11*	**Runners-up:** *2001-02*

Zidane... wonder-volley

In the history of the German Bundesliga, no team has ever finished second as often as Bayer Leverkusen without winning the league. Their reputation as perennial runners-up was compounded in the 2001-02 season: as the end of the campaign approached, they were on course for an extraordinary treble – top of the Bundesliga and into the finals of both the German Cup and Champions League. In the end they won nothing, pipped to the league by Borussia Dortmund by a single point, thumped 4-2 by Schalke in the cup, and undone by a Zidane-inspired Real Madrid in Europe.



Floored...2001-02 Champions League runners-up

Goal machine... Victor Boniface

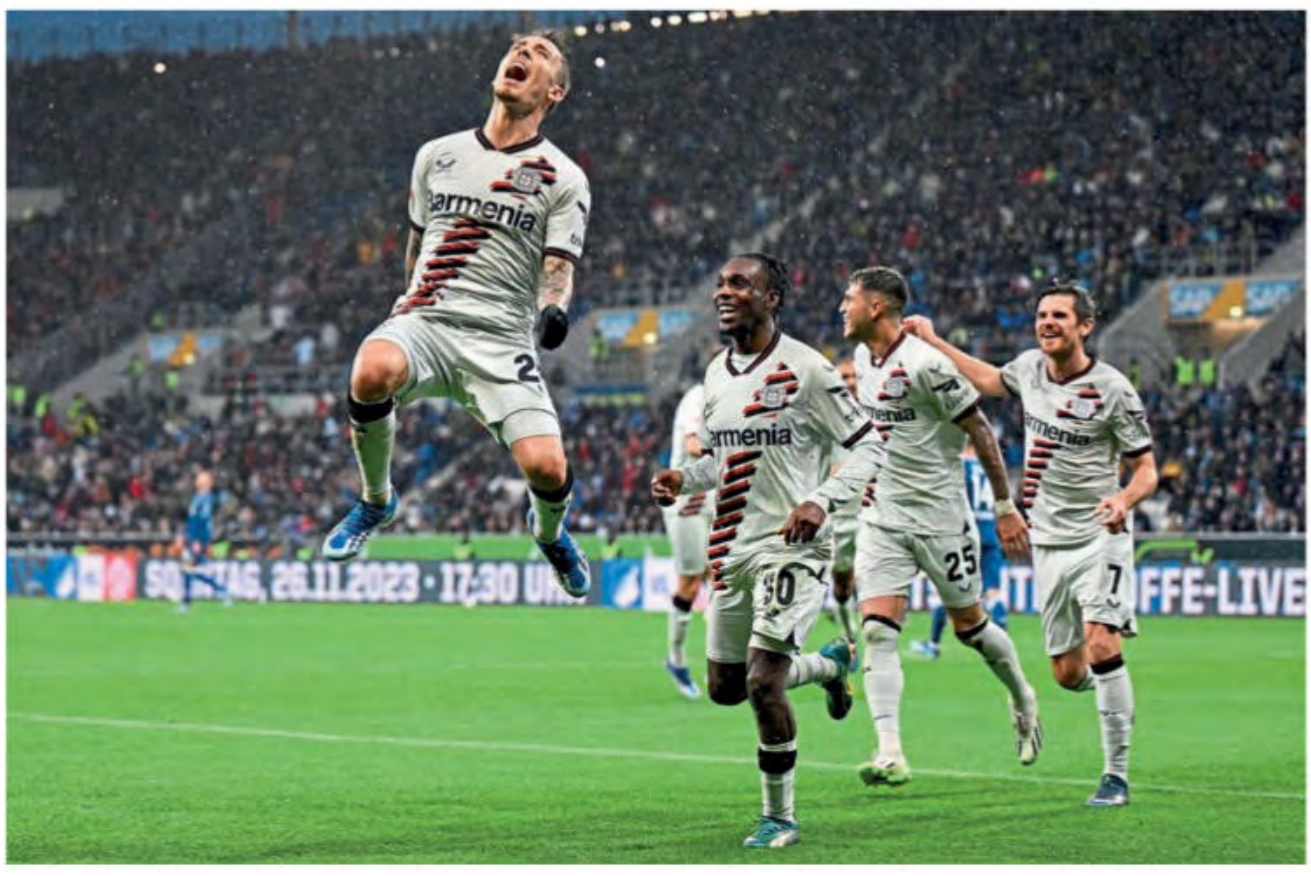
just as happy initiating a lightning-fast counter-attack as patiently and precisely playing through the lines from front to back. Alonso was a great distributor of the ball as a player (and remains so, judging from social media clips of him joining in with training) and his Leverkusen perform with the same control and foresight. Their slick combination play often is a work of art and they are perfectly happy to shift the ball around before applying the *coup de grace*. The best example? The 29-pass manoeuvre that led to their first goal in a 3-0 win at Borussia Moenchengladbach back in August.

While Alonso clearly has drilled his players to religiously espouse certain passing schemes, choreographed triangles and give-and-gos, he naturally encourages his players to improvise as well. Such is the quality of his team's movement and positional awareness, there always seems to be options. If one passing lane is blocked, suddenly two or three alternatives appear. In the ease with which they side-step the opposition's press and the flowing nature of their possession game – inspired in the middle of the park by the likes of Granit Xhaka, Exequiel Palacios, Alex Grimaldo and boy wonder Florian Wirtz – they have something of a Pep Guardiola vibe about them.

Unfortunately for Bayer Leverkusen, the "choker" tag has stuck

Under previous Leverkusen coaches (Gerardo Seoane, Peter Bosz and Roger Schmidt), the *Werkself* were known for their naivety, defensive gaffes and an obsession with flooding men forward that bordered on the suicidal. Alonso has changed all that, adding substance, consistency and balance to the mix. Xabi regularly uses the word "mature". His team are just that.

If Leverkusen this season is very much the Alonso Show, a great deal of the credit for the Rhinelanders' renaissance lies with the club's scouting team and the fine work in the transfer market of director of sport Simon Rolfes, an underrated midfielder at the BayArena in his playing days. His recruitment work last summer speaks for itself: each of Leverkusen's four main summer signings – Switzerland midfielder Granit Xhaka (ex-Arsenal),



Star signing...Alex Grimaldo (left) has been a revelation at left wing-back

Spanish wing-back Alex Grimaldo (Benfica), attacking midfielder Jonas Hofmann (Gladbach) and Nigeria forward Victor Boniface (Union SG) – all settled in immediately, providing an invaluable upgrade in quality.

Rolfes says that the four new arrivals were Leverkusen's number one targets for a specific role. It says much for his powers of persuasion and negotiating nous that he managed to bring them all on board. And for the relatively inexpensive total outlay of €44.5 million.

Will Leverkusen stay the distance in the Bundesliga? Confidence in the ranks is sky-high and plainly Alonso has passed on his own winning mentality. That will be tested as the end of season approaches and the echoes of "Never-kusen" begin to reverberate. Much will depend on how they react to the weight of history, while Bayern are sure to dial up the pressure as they battle to defend their crown.

In the first half of the season, Leverkusen's starting line-up was remarkably stable, with four players starting every Bundesliga game prior to the winter break and four others beginning all bar one. Any injury setbacks will provide further testing, although their depth has been proven by their European form. Alonso has been more than happy to ring the changes on the continent, and the likes of Josip Stanisic, Piero Hincapie, Robert Andrich and Nathan Tella – all second-choice in the league – have delivered solid performances. Such consistency, irrespective of who is handed the starting shirt, speaks to a happy camp of well-coached players.

There is a long way to go, then. But Leverkusen have already defied the odds by coming this far. The "Never-kusen" tag could soon be a thing of the past.

Engine room...Bayer's central midfield duo Granit Xhaka and Exequiel Palacios

THE STADIUM

BayArena

Located in central Leverkusen, where the A1 and A3 motorways intersect, Leverkusen's home ground was originally known as the Ulrich Haberland Stadium, named after a former chairman of the Bayer firm. Built in the mid-1950s, the Haberland was officially opened in 1958 and had room for some 20,000 fans. During the 1980s and '90s, an extensive renovation programme took place, resulting in an ultra-modern 22,000 capacity all-seater arena, which was renamed the BayArena in 1998. Another major redevelopment was commissioned in 2007, involving the conversion of some seating areas into standing places and the installation of a new avant-garde roof structure. It presently can house 30,210 spectators, all of whom have perfect sight lines.

THE KIT

For the last 30 years, Leverkusen have experimented with various shirt designs, but always with red and black colours. Their current home strip consists of a black shirt with a red cross, but in the past they've tried vertical, horizontal and diagonal stripes, as well as sashes and strips. Before the mid-'90s, they often played in white, including in the 1987-88 season when they won the UEFA Cup. Five years later, they lifted the German Cup in all-red, shortly before black became a staple part of the home kit.

THE TEAM

THE TACTICS

The foundations of this team are provided by a back three that possesses not only the footballing ability to play out from the back, but also the strength, speed and aggression to protect Hradecky's goal while the rest of the team pushes on.

In front of them, Palacios and Xhaka provide ball-winning bite and drive; the latter setting the tone with his intelligence, experience and crafty left foot. The wing-backs are integral, particularly Grimaldo who drifts in from the left to showcase his exceptional creativity, while Frimpong provides boundless energy up and down the right flank.

Ahead of them, Hofmann and Wirtz have the freedom to drift, probe and create for Boniface – a prolific and "complete" striker according to Xabi Alonso – who also gives the team a physical presence and outlet.

THE COACH

Xabi ALONSO

Alonso effectively served as a coach-in-waiting during the bulk of a magnificent playing career, outstanding as a defensive midfielder and strategist for Real Sociedad, Liverpool, Real Madrid, Bayern Munich and Spain.

A two-time Champions League winner (with Liverpool in 2005 and Real Madrid in 2014), he won league titles in Spain and Germany and played a part in all three of *La Roja's* major tournament successes between 2008 and 2012.

Prior to his appointment as Leverkusen boss in autumn 2022, he cut his coaching teeth with Real Madrid's U14s and Real Sociedad's B team.

His father, Periko was a gritty midfielder for Sociedad, Barcelona and Spain, who went on to coach Basque teams Eibar and Sociedad.

STRONGEST XI

Lukas HRADECKY (C)
Between the posts since 2018, the skipper was out of form last season and almost left. Alonso's faith in the 34-year-old Finland keeper has reaped dividends.

Odilon KOSSOUNOU
The €23m Ivorian centre-back was a disappointment when first arriving from Club Brugge in 2021, but decided to stay put and has not put a foot wrong this season.

Jonathan TAH
Defensive prodigy who made his Hamburg debut aged 17 and his full bow for Germany three years later. With Leverkusen since 2015, he has been impeccable as Alonso's back-line organiser.

Edmond TAPSOBA
The Burkina Faso international is the prototype of the modern-day central defender. Signed from Portuguese side Vitoria Guimaraes for €18m in January 2020.

Jeremie FRIMPONG
The 23-year-old Dutchman is one of the quickest players in the Bundesliga. Spent 18 months at Celtic after coming through Manchester City's youth ranks.

Alex GRIMALDO
Picked up on a free from Benfica last summer, the 28-year-old Spaniard has to be a contender for Bundesliga Player of the Season. Already well into double figures for goals and assists combined, and a handy free-kick taker too.

Exequiel PALACIOS
A bit-part member of Argentina's 2022 World Cup-winning squad, the former River Plate man is one of the best defensive midfielders in the Bundesliga this season.

Granit XHAKA
The Switzerland international has been the key figure in Alonso's system since arriving from Arsenal, pulling the strings with intelligence. A much better passer than he is often given credit for.

Jonas HOFMANN
One of the most adaptable players in the Bundesliga, just as effective from attacking midfield, right-wing or even as a right-back. Signed for €10m from Gladbach last summer.

Florian WIRTZ
Equally influential as an attacking midfielder or winger, the 20-year-old is back to his devastating best after tearing cruciate ligaments in the spring of 2022.

Victor BONIFACE
The Nigerian, bought last summer from Belgian outfit Union SG for €19.5m, gives Leverkusen another dimension. Scores plenty, including seven in his first seven games, but wastes plenty of chances too.

THE BACK-UPS

Matej KOVAR
The ex-Czech Republic Under-21 goalkeeper, who arrived for €5m from Manchester United last summer, has worn the gloves in the Europa League this season.

Piero HINCAPIE
The versatile Ecuadorian, proficient as a central defender or left-back, lost his place in the line-up early in the campaign after a red-card carried over from last season.

Josip STANISIC
Munich-born and raised utility defender who has enjoyed limited game time on loan from Bayern Munich this season. The Croatian international can play across the back four or in defensive midfield.

Robert ANDRICH
As recently as 2023 he was rated among the most cultured deep-lying midfielders in the Bundesliga, but has fallen down Leverkusen's pecking order since the arrival of Xhaka. Can fill in as a sweeper.

Amine ADLI
French-born Morocco winger who is used as impact sub. A graduate of the Toulouse academy, he joined Leverkusen in 2021.

Nathan TELLA
Leverkusen signed the diminutive young winger from Southampton last summer. Spent last season on loan at Burnley, helping them win promotion to the Premier League.

Patrik SCHICK
Scored 24 goals in 27 Bundesliga games in 2021-22, but the elegant Czech forward has suffered plenty of injuries since. Signed from Roma in 2020 after a loan at RB Leipzig.

Ones to watch

Nick Bidwell highlights 12 players to keep an eye on in the knockout phase

Jorne SPILEERS

CLUB BRUGGE

No player in the Belgian league has improved more in recent times than the 19-year-old centre-back who, by some strange quirk of genetics, has the maturity, poise and football IQ of a grizzled and battle-hardened senior pro. Nothing ever seems to disconcert him. He was born for this.

A little more than 12 months ago, Spileers was featuring for Club Brugge's Under-18s. Now he exists on an altogether different plane, a guaranteed first-teamer and sufficiently impressive to already have earned a full call-up by Belgium, a non-playing squad member for the friendly victory over Serbia in November. Talk about a meteoric rise; young Spileers only made his debut for the Under-21s a couple of months previously.

Meteoric rise ...Spileers

Obviously, he still has plenty to do in order to secure a spot in Domenico Tedesco's Euro 2024 selection. His lack of experience may prove a dissuasive factor and he faces a lot of competition from the likes Zinho Vanheusden of Standard Liege, Anderlecht's Zeno Debast and Ameen Al Dakhil at Burnley for places behind first-choice trio Arthur Theate, Wout Faes and the evergreen Jan Vertonghen. But he clearly has a chance of going to Germany. A good run in the Europa Conference League with Brugge could be just the springboard he needs.

Nothing ever seems to disconcert Spileers. He was born for this

Even Brugge insiders appear to have been caught unawares by Spileers' rapid progress. Despite starting in ten top-flight games for the *Blauw-Zwart* towards the end the end of last season, the initial plan for 2023-24 was to send him on loan to top-flight minnows OH Leuven. New Club boss Ronny Deila decided otherwise, opting to make Spileers his first-choice centre-back alongside the experienced Brandon Mechele.

Spileers fits the top-class bill in so

Going under the radar... Fenerbahce's Szymanski

many ways. He reads the game well, quickly senses impending danger and is strong in the tackle, while also racking up the kilometres on matchdays. His greatest strength, however, is his technical ability, comfortable in possession and quick to move with the ball into advanced areas. He has been known to pop up in and around the opposition box, and early this season he scored with a well-struck long-range effort in a Conference League qualifier against Icelandic side Akureyri.

He was very much brought up in a football environment in eastern Flanders, with both his father and mother playing the game. Jorne suggests that he has inherited his father's will-to-win and aggression and his mother's skill.

Sebastian SZYMANSKI
FENERBAHCE

While attacking midfielder Dusan Tadic and centre-forward Edin Dzeko receive most of the plaudits for the Istanbul giants, the terrific work of the Poland ace, supplying plenty of goals and assists, often goes unnoticed.

Dereck KUTESA
SERVETTE

With cult hero striker Chris Bedia joining Union Berlin in January, the onus to produce match-winning moments for Servette – who are starting to show unmistakeable signs of returning to their old prominence in Swiss football – will now fall on the shoulders of talented winger Kutesa.

Matty CASH
ASTON VILLA

The Poland international might just be one of the most underrated players in the Premier League, and is relishing his change of role from right-back to wing-back under Unai Emery. Signed from Nottingham Forest in September 2020.

Hugo CUYPERS
GENT

Supporters of the Buffalos can only be delighted that their tremendously popular forward did not, as expected, complete a transfer to Bologna last summer. A self-made player who spends hours studying tactical matters.

Fans' favourite ...Hugo Cuypers

Kiril DESPODOV
PAOK

This season, his first in PAOK colours after arriving from Ludogorets, the 27-year-old Bulgaria winger has lived up to all expectations, proving himself both a cute finisher and irresistible provider of gilt-edged chances.

Junior Dina EBIMBE
EINTRACHT FRANKFURT

The Franco-Cameroon utility man, full of dynamism and physicality, was the focus of Bundesliga attention in December after scoring twice in Eintracht's shock 5-1 thrashing of Bayern Munich. Can play literally anywhere on the pitch.

Nikola MILENKOVIC
FIORENTINA

Combative, commanding Serbia centre-back who has been the rock at the heart of the *Viola* back line for the last six-and-a-half years. Rated in the €20m bracket, he was a reported object of desire for Jose Mourinho before the "Special One" left Roma.

Aitor RUIBAL
REAL BETIS

The 27-year-old Catalan is a Swiss Army knife of a player, capable of delivering the goods in any number of positions: both full-back slots, in wide midfield roles and up front. Recently fired in a cracker versus Real Madrid.

Pavel SULC
VIKTORIA PLZEN

Former Czech Under-21 standout, whose most significant assets are his calm finishing and ability to drift with menace into all areas of the final third. Usually plays as an attacking midfielder but can also lead the line himself.

Benjamin TAHIROVIC
AJAX

Acquired from Roma last summer, the Bosnian midfield holder has settled in remarkably in Amsterdam, doing a fine job of bringing more stability and purpose to the Ajax engine room. Tall, hard working and a quick-thinker.

Yusuf YAZICI
LILLE

Repeatedly held back by injuries and inconsistency, the elegant Turkish playmaker has become an undisputed pillar of the Lille first team over the last few months, always influential and often on the score sheet.

THE LAST DAYS OF ROMA

How Jose Mourinho's time in the Italian capital came to an end

Words: Paddy Agnew

It was the look of despair on Giuseppe's face that first sounded the alarm. Giuseppe, a lifelong Roma fan, works at the Vatican Press Office. It was the morning after Roma's mid-January Italian Cup elimination by city rivals, Lazio, and he was in total despair. Like a lot of Roma fans, he had only one thought in mind.

"Mourinho has got to go," he moaned, "and the sooner, the better".

You could argue that the sacking of Roma coach Jose Mourinho came as a surprise that flew in the face of the Portuguese guru's huge popularity with many of the club's fans. Yet the football realist would also point out that the recent Roma results under Mourinho had been disappointing.

On the day of Mourinho's dismissal, Roma stood ninth in Serie A, five points off the Champions League spots, while their current Europa League campaign sees them face Feyenoord in a February play-off for the next round. For the second-highest paid coach in Serie A (Max Allegri at Juventus is the highest), in charge of the club with the third-highest payroll in the league, these are not outstanding results.

If you really want to screw up in Rome, however, then lose yourself a derby, particularly one played just two months after a grizzly 0-0 draw in the first league derby of the season. A 3-1 away loss to Milan, just four days after that 1-0 defeat to Lazio, prompted the Friedkin family, Roma's owners, to pull the plug on the Special One.

Perhaps Mourinho was, to some extent, the victim of his early success at Roma, having spoiled the fans and the owners with previously unimagined European success by winning the inaugural 2021-22 Europa Conference League and reaching last season's Europa League final (beaten on penalties by Sevilla). Roma's open-top bus parade around the Eternal City after that Conference League title win against Feyenoord was celebrated by the fans in a manner worthy of Julius Caesar returning from the Gallic wars.

Mourinho had arrived in Rome a year earlier to a madly enthusiastic reception. He began on a hot July day on the Campidoglio hill, seat of Rome government, ancient and modern, quoting Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius and telling us: "Nothing comes from nothing and nothing returns to nothing". We were not quite sure what he (or the Emperor) meant, but it sure sounded like a promise of exciting days ahead.

And so they were. He came, he saw and he conquered. Above all, he kept his promise to put Roma back in the international limelight. The enthusiasm generated by him translated itself into huge success at the box-office. 65,000 sell-out crowds were the order of the day at the Olimpico for much of his time. The dour football was not always popular but he argued that needs must.

In recent times, he had been seriously undermined both by injuries and by squad strength (or lack thereof). For example, arguably his most talented attacking player, Paulo Dybala, comes

European hero... Mourinho lifts the Europa Conference League trophy in 2022

He came, he saw and he conquered. Above all, he kept his promise to put Roma back in the international limelight

complete with a "fragile" sticker on his shirt, having missed seven of Roma's first 20 games this season.

Experienced defender Chris Smalling, who has enjoyed a splendid Indian summer at Roma over the last five campaigns, has been absent since September with knee cartilage problems, and has played only three league games in 2023-24. Worse still, his central defensive partner, Marash Kumbulla, hadn't played at all this season before joining Sassuolo on loan in January.

For a coach who has won league titles in Portugal, England, Italy and Spain, not to mention two Champions League trophies, these should be routine problems. Yet falling out with injured players has been a recurring theme of Mourinho's career. In November, he told reporters that Smalling "isn't capable of playing through pain," an accusation that the former England centre-back responded to in a lengthy Instagram post after Jose's sacking. Smalling ended his message by thanking Mourinho, but news of the coach criticising an injured player will be all too familiar to fans of Chelsea, Manchester United and his other former clubs.

Likewise, his ability to keep himself centre-picture, arguing with referees and getting himself sent off, remains intact. Gamesmanship or tantrum-throwing? The numbers speak for themselves: of the seven games that Mourinho was red-carded in, Roma won only one, losing three and drawing three. He was booked in a further nine games and only won two of them, losing six, and sat in the stands numerous times serving touchline bans.

If that fierce temper failed to produce results, it might at least have helped forge his trademark siege mentality. Not for nothing, many of his senior players – including Dybala, Romelu Lukaku, captain Lorenzo Pellegrini, Gianluca Mancini and goalkeeper Rui Patricio – expressed their solidarity and thanks on social media channels the week following Mourinho's exit.

Where now for Roma? The Friedkins, father Dan and son Ryan, were typically decisive. Having decided to offload Mourinho, whose engagement had represented a first serious sign of intent from them at Roma, they immediately appointed former club captain Daniele De Rossi to take over from him. Perhaps they felt that having dumped one club icon, they had better replace him with another.

Mourinho's replacement...Daniele De Rossi

The 40-year-old De Rossi, a 2006 World Cup winner and someone who played 616 times for Roma (second only to Francesco Totti) between 2001 and 2019, takes the job on a six-month contract worth approximately €500,000 (a fraction of Mourinho's reported annual salary). He said that he had accepted the short-term contract because "neither I nor the team need a parachute".

De Rossi is not a total rookie, although his previous coaching experience was hardly an unqualified success. As coach of Serie B side SPAL between October 2022 and February 2023, he picked up just three wins in 17 games before being sacked.

But he got off to a good start, defeating Verona 2-1 just three days after his appointment. Two goals in 25 first-half minutes was a strong response to those many fans that chose to pay homage to Mourinho with banners. There was more than one message displayed inside the Stadio Olimpico, but the overall message was clear: "*Grazie, Mister*".

As for Mourinho, it remains to be seen what the future holds for him. But clearly we have not heard the last of the Special One.

***Grazie* Jose... "You defended us against everything and everyone; Rome does not forget"**

THE VIEW FROM PORTUGAL

Another Mourinho sacking elicits mixed reaction in Portugal

Jose Mourinho will forever remain the Special One in his homeland. His achievements did wonders for the standing of Portuguese football and he is perpetually cited as an inspiration for every Portuguese coach who has followed him. Hardly surprising then, that many jumped to his defence in the aftermath of his Roma dismissal.

"I'm very surprised," said former Portuguese championship-winning coach Augusto Inacio. "Mourinho pulled off a miracle by winning the Conference League. He pulled off a miracle by reaching the final of the Europa League. And now they were expecting another miracle. Mourinho paid the price for being practically a miracle worker."

Prominent sports commentator Mario Cagica gave a similar verdict. "It was a hasty decision. Roma were only five points off the Champions League places and are still in the Europa League."

Not that Mourinho has been beyond reproach. *Radio Renascenca* journalist Ines Braga Sampaio gave a damning summation of Mourinho's recent record: "He has been sacked five times in total, four times in the last nine years, and by each of the last four teams he's coached. Since 2013, Jose Mourinho has not seen out a project to the end."

Writing in *A Bola*, leading football journalist Luis Mateus summarised Jose's upward trajectory and subsequent decline: "Mourinho was first a coach before turning into a rockstar. He built the two dimensions at the same time, feeding them with victories, trophies, charisma and an extremely positive arrogance. His magnetic personality that can light up a dark room is still there, although naturally its sheen has been worn down.

"But the greatest Portuguese coach of all time has not aged well. Jose Mourinho made himself smaller, first by wanting to be the nemesis of Pep Guardiola and then by changing an idea of attacking and possession-based football that was noticeable from the first steps of his career at Porto, at Chelsea and whenever he didn't face Barcelona, at Real Madrid."

Despite the solemn analysis, Mateus ends with words of hope regarding Mourinho's future: "Football wants back the man who proved he was right when he said: 'I think I'm special!'"

Across Portuguese media there were no lack of suggestions as to Mourinho's next move. According to Bruno Roseiro, sports editor of the online outlet *Observador*, "given the current context, there are three possibilities open to Mourinho after his departure from Roma. First, Saudi Arabia. Mourinho has said he would like to experiment in a league that is now in vogue, and he could become the highest-paid coach in the world.

"A return to the Premier League has to be an option, with the instability at Chelsea and Newcastle opening up two other possibilities. Then there is the Portuguese national team position. Mourinho has frequently been rumoured as a potential Portugal coach."

Unsurprisingly, Mourinho's agent Jorge Mendes has already started paving the way for a new appointment. "I wasn't expecting this. He's a winner," said Mendes. "The fans are always right and they loved him. Not only the Roma fans, but the fans of all the clubs he's coached at. His conscience is clear. He knows he did a good job with a limited team."

That may be open to debate. Either way, modern football without the ginormous figure of Jose Mourinho involved in some prominent capacity is difficult to imagine. In all likelihood we will soon have the opportunity to appraise him and his inimitable personality once again.

Tom Kundert

6 of the best

MLS ones to watch

James Nalton identifies six players to keep an eye on ahead of the 2024 Major League Soccer season

1 Luis SUAREZ

INTER MIAMI

Lionel Messi will be the Inter Miami player drawing the majority of crowds, TV audiences and media attention, but if Suarez can repeat the performances he put in during the 2023 season with Gremio, he will be up there with Messi as the best player in Major League Soccer.

Suarez enters the league on the back of being named the best player in the Brazilian Serie A, where he finished the campaign with 17 goals and 11 assists in 33 games.

The 37-year-old Uruguayan is nursing an on-going knee problem, managing the pain game-by-game, which is why his deal with Miami is only for one year. But if he can be anything like the Suarez of old, or even the Suarez of last year, it will be one glorious campaign.

2 Bernard KAMUNGO

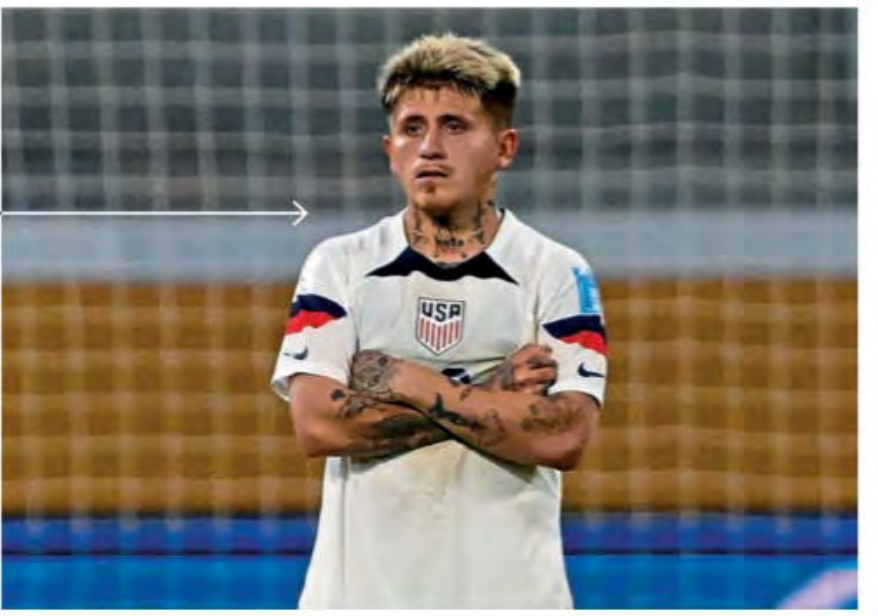
FC DALLAS

The Tanzanian-born forward was one of the most prolific goalscorers in the league last season in terms of minutes per goal, scoring six times despite only starting eight games – usually from the right wing.

Kamungo was born and grew up in a refugee camp in Tanzania before being resettled in Abilene, Texas in 2016, so he already had a remarkable story even before his rise to the FC Dallas first team via their MLS Next Pro team North Texas.

Now 22, the forward – who made his United States debut in a friendly against Slovenia in January – looks ready to play more MLS minutes for Dallas. If the goal return can remain as his minutes played increase, Kamungo could be one of the best attackers in the league.

3 Diego LUNA
REAL SALT LAKE



2023 was the year the 20-year-old talent began to break through in MLS. Luna played regularly in the United States team that won the CONCACAF U20 Championship in 2022. That same year, he earned a move to Real Salt Lake after demonstrating his promise in the second-tier USL Championship with El Paso Locomotive.

Luna was in and out of the team for the rest of that first season in Utah, occasionally playing for RSL's reserve side, Real Monarchs, but is now set to establish himself as an MLS regular and, likely, an MLS star.

A creative, imaginative and direct attacking midfielder, like Kamungo he was handed his first senior international cap in January.

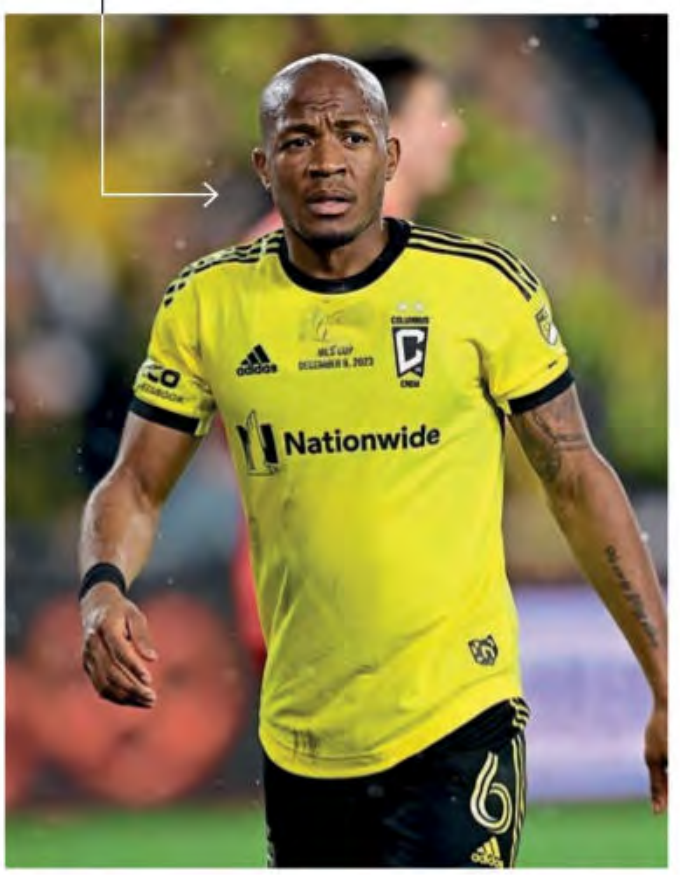
4 Luciano ACOSTA
FC CINCINNATI

There was no doubt which player deserved to be crowned MLS MVP in 2023. FC Cincinnati's playmaker was clearly the league's best player – finishing the regular season with 17 goals and ten assists – in the team that finished top of the standings to lift the Supporters' Shield.

Another Argentine No.10 over in Miami might be the favourite to claim the MVP award this time around, but there were no indications last year that Acosta's form will drop off in 2024.

If the 29-year-old can combine well with Aaron Boupendza – and his three assists for the forward towards the end of last season suggest he can – then Cincinnati could be challenging for honours once again in 2024.

5 Darlington NAGBE
COLUMBUS CREW



Nagbe has played for three different American sides and has lifted the MLS Cup with each. His latest triumph saw the tidy and intelligent midfielder guide Columbus Crew to the post-season title last year.

Born in Liberia but raised in the States, his MLS career began in 2011 when he was drafted by the Portland Timbers. He made over 200 appearances for the club – and earned the first of 25 US caps – before moving to Atlanta United, winning an MLS Cup in his first season there in 2018.

The Crew's style under head coach Wilfried Nancy is an ideal fit for Nagbe's style of play. It is not just longevity that marks him out as an MLS legend: he also can knit a team together to help them control and win games, which he'll continue to do in 2024.

6 Chris BRADY
CHICAGO FIRE

After stepping in to replace another promising young USMNT goalkeeper from the Chicago ranks – Gabriel Slonina, who moved to Chelsea last year – 19-year-old Brady impressed in his debut season as Chicago Fire's first choice between the posts, maintaining the same level of quality as his predecessor and recognised by the club as Defensive Player of the Year.

Along with the likes of Cincinnati's Roman Celentano and Columbus Crew's Patrick Schulte, Brady is among an emerging group of players in a position in which the US has traditionally been strong.

THE FIVE-YEAR PLAN

RB Leipzig's strategy to build a women's team as successful as their men's is right on schedule

Words: Rich Laverty

Promotion party...RB Leipzig women's players celebrate winning the second-tier title last season

Despite the name and the brand, those at the helm of Red Bull Leipzig's women's team are keen to maintain that they are currently part of a long-term project.

While the men's team is recognised as regular title challengers and UEFA Champions League participants, the women's team was only created in 2016 and, after working their way up through the leagues, was promoted to the Bundesliga in time for this season.

There is no talk of titles and cups just yet; heading into the winter break, the team sat one place above the relegation zone. For now, the club is operating with a philosophy of developing their own players, and are not yet ready to become a completely professional outfit like the country's leading women's teams, Bayern Munich and Wolfsburg.

But Leipzig do have plenty of experience behind the scenes – two world champions no less – in the form of sporting director Viola Odebrecht, who also won four European Cups as a player, and legendary striker Anja Mittag, who is one of the team's assistant coaches.

"It will still take time," says Mittag of the team's long-term vision, after just one win in the first ten games of the season. "We have some young players, it's not like we bought lots of experienced national team players. We still have a philosophy, which we try to keep and develop our game in that way.

"It takes time, but also the players maybe feel a different pressure to another team. RB Leipzig stands for things; it's a big club. All of women's football in Germany expects us to stay up and that's pressure for the girls to handle."

Odebrecht was the first of the experienced

duo to arrive, leaving Wolfsburg's academy in May 2019 to take up her role when Leipzig were still in the third tier. Mittag joined shortly afterwards, initially as a player-coach to sign off on an illustrious career that saw her win a World Cup, three European Championships and a whole host of domestic honours.

While to the outside eye it looks like a rapid journey that has taken them from bottom to top in just seven years, Odebrecht, knowing the plan from day one, feels differently.

"When I came here in 2019 I made a strategy for the chief executive officer, a five-year plan, and we said: 'What do we need for an infrastructure? For players? And in what period of time?' We did it exactly in the time we planned it, so it hasn't felt that fast to me."

That initial five-year plan comes to an end at the conclusion of the current campaign and the next one is reliant on remaining in the Frauen Bundesliga. Relegation would be a blow – albeit probably a temporary one – to their long-term aim: reaching the same levels as the men's team.

Over the years, things have become more integrated between the two teams. Instead of playing away from the town of Leipzig, the women's team now uses the Sportanlange Gontardweg, the state training centre for women and girls of the Saxony Football Association, which was taken over by RB Leipzig in 2016.

"We talk a lot and try to find what kind of things we can adapt, because they did a great job developing the men's side," says Odebrecht of the closer relationship. "They're a Champions League club and that's our goal too.

"We talk about everything, from sales and commercial to physiotherapy, what can we adapt and what do we need to develop ourselves? Because women's football is different in some ways to men's football. The collaboration is very strong, but we can go our own path too in certain things, we just need to see what we can take from them and then what we can innovate ourselves."

Masterminds... Anja Mittag and Viola Odebrecht
Photos credit: RB Leipzig/motivio

Heading into the winter break, the team had managed just eight goals in ten games, with three coming from exciting 22-year-old striker Vanessa Fudalla, top scorer in last season's second division. Fudalla is one of several young players the team are relying on to step up, with only 30-year-old forward Sandra Starke, formerly of Wolfsburg, providing top-flight experience.

It is now where the value of Mittag and Odebrecht can shine through, as two of Germany's most experienced internationals, and both are acutely aware of the role they can play in times of hardship.

"I think for my colleagues who have only worked in the men's game, it's a good thing," says Odebrecht. "They can learn from our experience because before we came here we were in the women's game and the club only did it as an amateur sport. Anja and I know the game. I've been in the game 25 years as a former player and coach and Anja similar.

"It's more about how women work, what are the characteristics in the game? What challenges do they face? It's different challenges to the men. When you compare ten years ago to the game we play now, it's totally different, and even Anja and I need to adapt to be more innovative and brave. The money is going into the game and you can see some issues we face that we didn't ten years ago."

Mittag, who with 158 caps is fourth in Germany's all-time appearances list, adds: "It helps us a lot in our way of communicating to players too, the little bits of advice we can give. I've been there, I know how it feels to be benched or subbed off or whatever it is. I can bring the experience from other clubs I've played for, clubs who

Champions... Medina Desic lifts the 2. Bundesliga title last May

Promising striker...Vanessa Fudalla joined in 2020

struggled, clubs who won.

"You still develop yourself too. I've developed so much in the last four years and I can bring that from my playing experiences and it helps me too to develop and give back to the players. I can try to implement things I've seen in the past, there's a lot as a group we can learn from each other."

They are also not losing sight of the bigger picture though, and that is creating a sustainable structure behind the scenes. While they could go and spend big to catch Bayern and Wolfsburg, who are littered with world-class talent, it would go against what the club's strategy is all about, and they have no plans to veer from that despite the threat of relegation.

"The Bundesliga expects much more from you, there's less space for mistakes, so we all have to take a step forward to do what it takes to stay in the league," says Mittag. "The club is still really young and it takes time to be a team that players say: 'Yeah, I want to play for them.'

"For all these reasons, it takes time to build this reputation, this kind of club and to recruit the best young players."

Odebrecht adds that "we are not done yet" and points to the work needing to be done to improve their academy so they can develop players within the Red Bull philosophy, with the goal of having a player per season progress from the academy to the first team.

They also know they have to grow with the game, because any five-year plan has to take into account the fact that women's football is potentially the fastest growing sport in the world, and in 2029 it will once again be in a very different place to where it is now.

"That's a challenge, actually," admits Odebrecht. "The women's game even in the past two years has grown so much."

Mittag agrees: "There are more spectators, the new generation is maybe different to my generation, it's different and you have to consider all this. There's more to think about, it's more professional, it requires more staff. There's less room for mistakes in how you work."

> "When I came here in 2019 I made a five-year plan…We did it exactly in the time we planned it"
>
> RB Leipzig women's sporting director Viola Odebrecht

Previously, the team started training at 7pm and finished at 9pm, now they train sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon. They play home games in Leipzig rather than a nearby town, but all the players still either study or work outside football, and as Mittag puts it "there's work to do" to change that within the infrastructure, but the long-term plan remains.

"Staying in the league is the main goal, to progress and take the next steps, but to develop the players and make them even better," says the former striker. "Then to scout some interesting players to make RB Leipzig an attractive club for players, but first we want to build a team to compete with the bigger clubs. It's step by step."

Odebrecht echoes the sentiments, and won't stray away from the club's wider philosophy, but is also proud of what they have achieved so far, whatever happens this season.

"We want to push our youth department a little more to develop our coaches, develop our players and focus on our own players rather than buy expensive ones from all over the world.

"I think I speak for all my colleagues who have helped [get us here], we're proud of this. It's always easy to look from the outside and say: 'They have this and that', but they don't see how much hard work it takes.

"I think we did a good job as a whole team and I know other Bundesliga clubs think next season we will play for the title, but I know there is a lot of hard work to do that, but we can take these steps and build a sustainable club on the women's side."

Glenn Moore

The road to Paris

The final qualifiers for this summer's Olympic Games are approaching

Road to Paris... Australia will face Uzbekistan in a play-off to qualify for this summer's Olympics

Though its status is under pressure, the Olympic football tournament remains the women's game's biggest prize after the World Cup and eyes are increasingly being drawn to Paris as this summer's jamboree nears.

The path to gold will narrow significantly by the end of February as all but two of the dozen qualifiers – known as a series of eliminators – play out across the globe.

Five countries are already inked in: hosts France, defending champions Canada, four-time gold medallists USA, plus Brazil and Colombia.

Five nations from Europe, Asia and Oceania will now book their places, with Africa's contenders reduced to four, from which two will qualify.

While arguably the most intriguing tie is in Asia, where Japan face North Korea, much of the focus will be on Europe where world champions Spain must beat Netherlands in the Nations League semi-finals to secure their Olympic spot.

EUROPE

UEFA had previously sent the best finishers at the World Cup to the Olympics, which this year would have been Spain and England/GB besides hosts France. However, the arrival of the Nations League, and the need to give it meaning, meant a change; now, the two best finishers in that competition will qualify alongside France.

> The Olympics could do with Spain making what would be their competition debut for the credibility of the event

The Olympics could do with Spain making what would be their competition debut for the credibility of the event. In contrast to the men's tournament, which is primarily an Under-23 event, women's Olympic football has been one of the sport's major prizes since being launched in 1996, being an open-age competition that usually features most of the elite players.

But the demands of the calendar threaten to squeeze it, as does the rise of the European Championship which, following the growth of the game in Europe, may now be a higher collective standard.

As it stands, World Cup finalists England (or rather, their Olympian alter ego Great Britain) and semi-finalists Sweden have already failed to make it. If Spain miss out too, the gold may lose a little of its lustre.

While Spain successfully made it through to the semi-finals England did not, pipped at the post by the Netherlands – although that may be a blessing in disguise. The Lionesses, who would have provided the bulk of the squad, went deep in summer tournaments in 2021 (as GB in Tokyo), 2022 and 2023, and have the 2025 Euros on the horizon. Captain Leah Williamson, who is just back from the ACL injury that ruled her out of the World Cup, said after her initial disappointment at England's exit: "One of the first things that popped into my head was, 'At least they'll probably all get another two or three years on their career now, because they'll get a summer off. Everyone needs a rest and now they'll get one'."

Should the Dutch qualify they will have five tournaments in succession, culminating in 2025. A dozen players are in line to play their fourth successive summer if they make the Olympics.

Qualification is complicated by France's progress to the last four. They play Germany in Lyon on February 23 while Spain host the Netherlands in Cadiz. The winners of the latter semi-final will qualify for the Olympics, and so will Germany if they reach the final. But if France make the final, the third-place play-off (on February 28) will take on more significance, as the winners will go to Paris.

ASIA

The 31 teams who entered have been reduced to four, who will play a pair of two-legged ties on February 24 and 28 for the right to go to France. One pits Australia against Uzbekistan, the only one of the quartet yet to play at an Olympics. The other pairs Japan and North Korea, back after withdrawing from qualification for both the Tokyo Olympics and 2023 World Cup.

North Korea were in the same second round qualifying group as South Korea. The nations, divided by the 38th parallel, drew 0-0 but the North topped the pool thanks to the South being held by group hosts China after conceding a late goal.

OCEANIA

Samoa are hosting the qualifying event – two groups of four – which began on

February 7 and will conclude with the final in Apia on February 19. New Zealand, seeking a fifth successive qualification, and Papua New Guinea were seeded in each group. Tonga, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, American Samoa and Fiji make up the octet.

AFRICA

Four two-legged ties are being held on February 19 and 28 with the winners progressing to April's fourth round, from which two qualifiers will emerge. One tie features the only remaining teams from North Africa, Tunisia and Morocco, neither of whom have played at an Olympics. Powerhouses Cameroon and Nigeria, both of whom have done so, also meet. Tanzania and Ghana, both seeking a first appearance, face former Olympians Zambia and South Africa respectively.

CONCACAF

Despite being defending Olympic champions, Canada still had to qualify, which they did via a play-off against Jamaica. The CONCACAF W Championship, held in Mexico last summer, served as qualifying with the winners booking a place in Paris and the second and third teams playing off.

The United States romped through the competition with five straight wins, 13 goals scored and none conceded. A late Alex Morgan penalty saw off Canada in the final. Jamaica, meanwhile, defeated Costa Rica in the third-place play-off but two months later lost home-and-away to a Canadian side in no mood to slip up.

SOUTH AMERICA

The 2022 Copa America Femenina doubled up as qualifying, with both finalists making it. That meant the semi-finals were the matches that mattered with Brazil beating Paraguay 2-0 and hosts Colombia defeating Argentina 1-0. Brazil thus maintained their record of being the only side, along with the US, to feature in all eight women's Olympic football tournaments. Colombia, at their third tournament, will be aiming for a first victory.

Spain debut?... *La Roja* are aiming to qualify for the Olympic tournament for the first time

Round-up

Into the Champions League knockouts ...Chelsea celebrate beating Paris FC

GERMANS MISS OUT IN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

For the first time ever, no German teams reached the Champions League last eight with Bayern Munich joining Wolfsburg and Eintracht Frankfurt on the sidelines. But Benfica have become the first Portuguese quarter-finalists and Ajax the first Dutch since 2007.

The main drama was in Group C. After 84 minutes of the final round, with Bayern beating PSG and Ajax being held by Roma, Bayern were top and PSG second. Then an own goal by Zara Kramzar put Ajax top, with Bayern second. Then another own goal, by England's Georgia Stanway in the 88th minute, put PSG top, Ajax second – and Bayern out.

Barcelona cruised through Group A joined by Benfica, who not only edged out Frankfurt but were only denied a notable 4-3 victory over Barca by a 96th-minute Lucy Bronze equaliser.

Lyon were held at Brann but won every other match to top Group B. Second-placed Brann became the first Norwegian quarter-finalists in five seasons.

Chelsea comfortably advanced in Group D despite being held at home by runners-up Hacken. The Swedes ended the remarkable run of Paris FC, who had knocked out Arsenal and Wolfsburg and beaten Real Madrid home and away. The Spanish giants endured a miserable group stage, winning just one point.

ACL CURSE STRIKES AGAIN

Manchester City's record signing Jill Roord has become the latest high-profile player to suffer an anterior cruciate knee ligament injury. City paid £300,000 to sign the Dutch international last summer, who will almost certainly miss out on the Olympics if the Netherlands qualify.

Curse of the ACL... Jill Roord

Likewise, Chelsea and Australia star Sam Kerr will also not be heading to Paris – should the Matildas make it – after sustaining a similar injury.

HERMOSO SWAPS CLUBS

Jenni Hermoso, the player at the centre of the World Cup "kiss" scandal, has left Pachuca for fellow Mexican team Tigres UANL. The 33-year-old forward scored 23 goals in 32 games for Pachuca.

Welcome to Tigres ...Jenni Hermoso

THORNS ACQUIRE NEW OWNERS, LOSE SEVECKE

Denmark defender Rikke Sevecke has been forced to retire with a heart condition at the age of 27. The former Brondby and Fleury player left Everton for Portland Thorns in September but never played for the National Women's Soccer League club.

Thorns, meanwhile, are now under new ownership, bought by the Bhathal family, investors in the NBA's Sacramento Kings, for a reported $63 million.

WANT IT TODAY?
GO DIGITAL

In the next issue

With the main focus of March's issue on the UEFA Champions League and the club game, the attention of *World Soccer*'s April 2024 edition switches to the international stage.

We have reaction from the Africa Cup of Nations and Asian Cup tournaments with reviews, squads and results, while we preview the Euro 2024 play-offs and CONCACAF Nations League finals, and digest developments at the South American Under-23 Championship by reviewing the competition and highlighting the stars of the future.

Plus, don't miss dispatches from Spain and Gibraltar, as well as comment from Keir Radnedge, Jonathan Wilson and Jim Holden.

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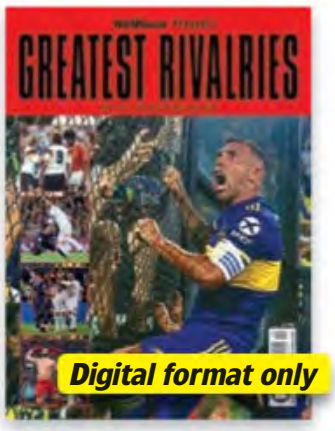

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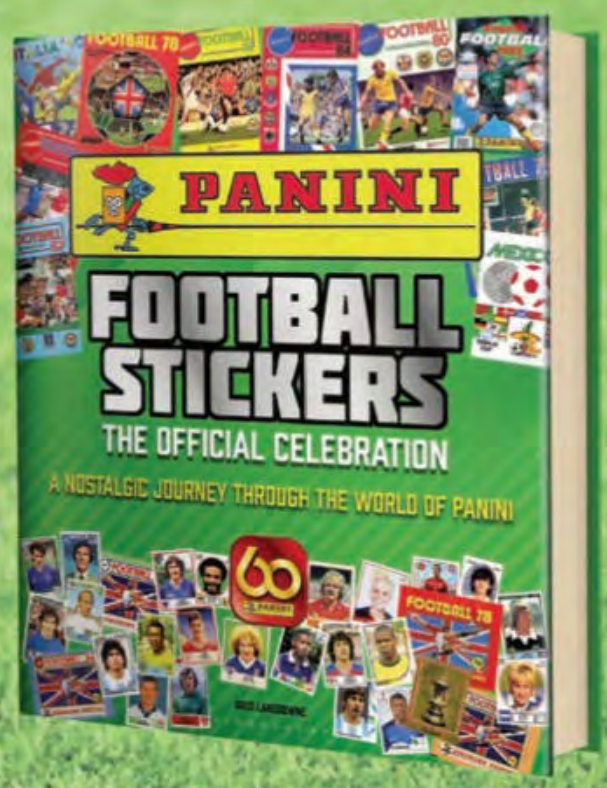

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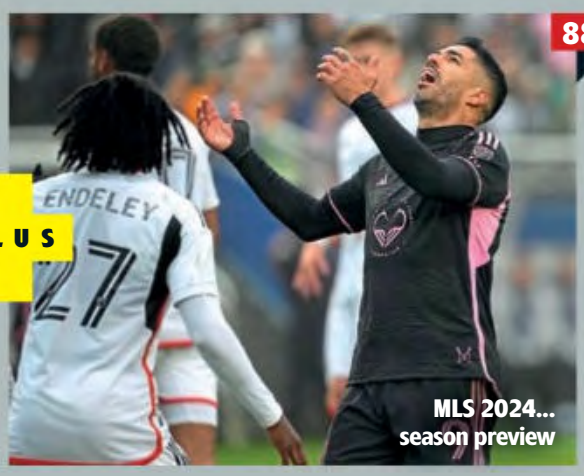

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Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Into the knockouts... Kawasaki Frontale midfielder Kento Tachibanada

Champions League knockout rounds begin

The last 16 has already begun, with the quarter-finals soon to follow

February is usually a time when the Asian Champions League gets going but not in 2024 as, due to a calendar change, the 16 teams remaining have been preparing instead for the second round that kicked off in mid-February.

The question before the group stage started back in September was whether anyone could stop the big-spending teams from Saudi Arabia. So far, the answer is no, with all four sides from the kingdom making it through. Three – Al Ittihad, Al Hilal and Al Nassr – topped their groups with the help of their megastars, while Al Fayha, not one of the big-spending sides backed by the Public Investment Fund, squeezed through as the fourth of the four best performing second-placed teams.

The latter were drawn with Al Nassr in an all-Saudi tie. It is hard to know what kind of form the teams will be in – due to the Asian Cup, there were no Saudi Pro League games from the end of December to February – but Al Fayha lost their last five league games before the break and dropped down to 14th in the 18-team league, just two points above the relegation zone. With little involvement in the Asian Cup, their players have at least been able to rest and train. But facing Al Nassr, with Cristiano Ronaldo keen to add the Asian Champions League to his five European titles, is going to be tough.

Neymar was just starting to settle at Al Hilal when he picked up a season-ending injury while on international duty in October, but the Brazilian

Leading goalscorer...Al Nassr's Brazilian forward Anderson Talisca scored six times in the group stage

has not been missed. When the Saudi league resumed in February, the four-time continental champions were seven points clear at the top of the table, unbeaten in all competitions since August. Their opponents, Iranian side Sepahan, will have their work cut out.

Organisers are hoping that the Iranian leg will pass without major incident. In the group stage, Al Ittihad arrived from Jeddah to face Sepahan but refused to take the field, reportedly due to the pitchside presence of three busts of slain Iranian general Qasem Soleimani. The AFC handed the Saudis a 3-0 win. The Iranians have promised that there won't be a repeat.

The question before the group stage started back in September was whether anyone could stop the big-spending teams from Saudi Arabia. So far, the answer is no

Al Ittihad, whose patchy form saw Nuno Espirito Santo replaced as head coach by Marcelo Gallardo in November, have a longer trip. The first leg will take place at the Uzbekistan home of Navbahor, a team from the very east of the Central Asian country that is making a first appearance in the competition.

The only western region tie (the tournament is divided into two geographic zones until the final) not featuring a Saudi team is also the only tie between two group winners: Nasaf Qarshi of Uzbekistan against Al Ain from the United Arab Emirates. The former topped a group containing Qatari powerhouses Al Sadd as well as teams from UAE (Sharjah) and Jordan (Al Faisaly), while Al Ain finished ahead of Al Fayha in Group A. It looks to be an evenly balanced tie, with a Saudi opponent awaiting the winners in the quarter-finals.

Over in the eastern zone, there are three teams each from South Korea and Japan with China and Thailand having sole representatives.

Ventforet Kofu were the story of the group stage as the team from Japan's second tier – who qualified with a domestic cup win – finished top of their group above Melbourne City, China's Zhejiang and Thai champions Buriram United. Their reward is a very tricky tie with South Korean champions, as well as 2012 and 2020 Asian title winners, Ulsan HD (recently rebranded from Ulsan Hyundai). For Kofu to get to the last eight really would be impressive.

Fellow Japanese club Kawasaki Frontale meet Shandong Taishan of China in what should be a fascinating match-up. Shandong just missed out on the Chinese title late last year and squeezed into the second round by the narrowest of margins. Losing Marouane Fellaini since is a blow and the Belgian's aerial and all-round physical presence will be missed. Kawasaki have badly underachieved on the Asian stage over the years and this could be a perfect way to get a step closer to rectifying that.

Yokohama F. Marinos have, like Kawasaki, struggled to replicate domestic form on the continental stage and, like Shandong, have seen a major departure. As soon as the group stage finished in December, head coach Kevin Muscat left to take over Shanghai Port. Even so, Yokohama will fancy their chances of getting past Bangkok United.

While none of the three Japanese teams left have won the competition, Korean titans Pohang Steelers and Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors have five between them but only one will make it to the last eight.

Three-time Asian champions...Pohang Steelers face Korean counterparts Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors

QUARTER-FINAL DRAW

WEST ZONE

Nasaf Qarshi *or*
Al Ain
v
Al Fayha *or*
Al Nassr

Sepahan *or*
Al Hilal
v
Navbahor *or*
Al Ittihad

EAST ZONE

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors *or*
Pohang Steelers
v
Ulsan HD *or*
Ventforet Kofu

Shandong Taishan *or*
Kawasaki Frontale
v
Bangkok United *or*
Yokohama F. Marinos

United States

JAMES NALTON

Messi set for MLS spotlight

The Argentine and his Inter Miami team-mates will dominate the MLS headlines in a big year for North American football

The 2024 Major League Soccer season will be one of settling into a new era, preparing to ride the wave generated by what will be some of the biggest soccer moments seen on North American shores. It's an era of Lionel Messi, Apple TV and the hosting of high-profile international tournaments.

The 2024 season will be Messi's first proper MLS campaign. Though he arrived at Inter Miami last year, his initial involvement was in the mid-season Leagues Cup tournament, which Miami won. But having joined with the 2023 season already well underway, his league exploits were limited to a late cameo.

Miami finished 27th out of 29 teams last year but still qualified for the Champions Cup (CONCACAF's version of the Champions League) thanks to that Messi-inspired Leagues Cup success. They go from being the third-worst team in the league to favourites to win it.

This being MLS, there will still be occasional turbulence along the way. It is part of the ride in any American soccer competition, and there was controversy even before the season started. In January, MLS announced it would withdraw its US-based teams from the country's national cup competition – the US Open Cup – only for the United States Soccer Federation to block the move days later. It meant the relationship between MLS and US Soccer was strained even before the season began, and it will be interesting to see how MLS teams approach the Open Cup this season.

Aside from that hiccup, everything is in place for it to be one of the league's most celebrated seasons yet. Whatever else happens, the headline act will be Messi and the Inter Miami road show. In Harlem Globetrotters style, Inter's global pre-season tour included stops in El Salvador, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong and Japan, as well as a home friendly against Leo's boyhood club Newell's Old Boys.

But while Messi and Co. will naturally be used as a marketing tool for the league, on the sporting side, the coach, Gerardo Martino, and the players are focused on success on the field. Luis Suarez was added to the mix ahead of 2024, completing a former Barcelona quartet of himself, Messi, Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba. In typical ultra-competitive fashion, Suarez has already said the team are aiming to win "all four titles", and Busquets has spoken of the need to find the right balance between the sporting side and the business side.

> **Whatever else happens, the headline act will be Messi and the Inter Miami road show**

Messi's presence will naturally overshadow everything else in the league when it comes to global media attention, which is perhaps unfair on last season's standout teams – FC Cincinnati and Columbus Crew. The two Ohio clubs both enjoyed success in 2023, in the shape of the Supporters' Shield (league title) and the MLS Cup (post-season play-offs) respectively.

Cincinnati go into the new campaign boasting the official best player in MLS, last season's MVP Luciano Acosta, while Columbus are led by the most talked-about head coach in the league, French tactician Wilfried Nancy. Both teams will be present in the Champions Cup along with Miami.

Competing on multiple fronts can affect any team, so the large MLS contingent in the CONCACAF competition – ten teams in total – could mix things up in the league, especially early in the season. This could benefit the likes of Atlanta United, Seattle

Reunited in Miami...Lionel Messi with former Barcelona team-mates Luis Suarez and Sergio Busquets

Centre of attention...all MLS eyes will be on Messi in 2024

Preview

Sounders and Los Angeles FC who haven't qualified for the Champions Cup but are built to challenge in MLS and will expect to do so.

The visibility and profile of the league have been affected not just by Messi, but also by a new-look broadcast deal with Apple TV, MLS Season Pass, which began last season. On the whole, putting the majority of the league's games behind a subscription streaming service and taking them away from more traditional TV channels has been

MLS's "most talked-about coach" ...Columbus Crew's Wilfried Nancy

good for existing MLS supporters, but makes the league less accessible to casual fans. The league hope Messi will attract viewers regardless and lead to an uptick in subscriptions, but it could also prevent the league from finding a casual audience and converting them into longer-term followers. Season ticket holders of MLS teams, though, do get Season Pass included with their ticket, which is a welcome initiative.

2024 will also be the first year since 2016 in which no new teams will be added through expansion. San Diego FC are due to enter in 2025, but this year will, in many ways, be a season for settling down and setting the agenda ahead of a key period for the league and the sport in the US.

The Copa America will take place in the United States this summer and MLS will continue to play during it, before the region hosts the first expanded FIFA Club World Cup in 2025 and the FIFA World Cup in 2026.

These are monumental moments for soccer in the United States and Canada and, as has been the case since its inaugural season in 1996, MLS will play a key role.

South Korea

JOHN DUERDEN

Preview

New-look Ulsan ready to defend title

The reigning K-League champions have rebranded since last season and are the team to beat yet again in 2024

The 2024 K-League season kicks off on March 1, a national holiday on the peninsula that commemorates the people and movement that fought for independence from the Japanese colonisers in the first half of the 20th century. It is always a well-marked day, though often very cold, and should result in big crowds, lustily sung national anthems and plenty of Taegeukgi flags flying from apartment windows as well as stadiums.

There is some optimism ahead of the season. Attendances last year reached an average of almost 11,000, the highest for a decade, and there were record ticket revenues for the top tier worth around £20 million. These are not spectacular numbers but show a positive upwards trend. An exciting title race should help, especially as there wasn't really one last time with Ulsan Hyundai establishing a healthy lead early in the season and never really looking like letting go. It was so comfortable that even a late bad run offered no hope to the challengers.

Holders...Ulsan HD have rebranded since last year's league title win

Experienced coach... Kim Hak-bum has taken charge of Jeju United

The chasing pack, such as it was, was led by Pohang Steelers and the top two will meet on the opening day. However, this is not quite the same champion as before. Just days after lifting the league trophy for the second successive season and the fourth in total, the title winners rebranded themselves to Ulsan HD to align with the image of the owners. Last year Hyundai Heavy Industries, the world's biggest shipbuilder, rebranded as HD Hyundai. The new-look tiger in the club's logo has been redesigned to look "more dynamic and courageous".

Just days after lifting the league trophy for the second successive season and the fourth in total, the title winners rebranded themselves to Ulsan HD

The champions' key players are still there for the upcoming campaign, such as last season's league top scorer Joo Min-kyu and veteran centre-back Kim Young-gwon, and reinforcements have arrived too. Ex-international midfielder Kim Min-woo has been brought back from China, while striker Kelvin (Atletico Goianiense) and his fellow Brazilian midfielder Matheus Sales (Coritiba) have been brought in. Head coach Hong Myung-bo is still hungry for more success and it may be that Ulsan end up focusing a little more on capturing a third Asian Champions League crown.

The opening game against Pohang is a derby of sorts, with both industrial cities – Ulsan shipbuilding and Pohang steelmaking – situated on the southeast coast. The Steelers, however, have a new coach in place. Park Tae-ha is a former player who has experience on the coaching staff of the national team as well as in China. It remains to be seen if Pohang have the strength in depth to challenge at home and abroad.

Elsewhere, Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors want their domestic crown back. The Greens are the most successful team in the K-League's 41-year history and have been dominant since the first of nine titles came in 2009. After a series of titanic struggles at the top between Jeonbuk and Ulsan, the Motors finished fourth last term, the first failure to take a top-two spot since 2013.

Romanian Dan Petrescu took the job last summer and has much to do to show he can return the team to the top. He has already lost ex-Barcelona graduate Paik Seung-ho who has joined Birmingham City, although another one-time prodigy has arrived in the shape of Kwon Chang-hoon. An ex-international, Kwon's once hugely promising career never really recovered from an Achilles injury on the eve of the 2018 World Cup.

FC Seoul last won the title in 2016 but have had some struggles since. Last season brought a seventh-place finish. Kim Gi-dong has left Pohang to take over the team in the northwest of the capital. "Whilst at Pohang, after winning the FA Cup, I thought about making a change. I wanted a new challenge," he said. "This year I will try to help FC Seoul rediscover its glory. Hopefully, we can put smiles on the fans' faces."

The big elephant not in the room is Suwon Samsung Bluewings who were relegated last season. The four-time Korean and two-time Asian champions will be missed, but it is hoped that a spell in the second tier can act as a reset.

Coming the other way are Gimcheon Sangju, the country's army team made up of players who are doing their military service. A battle to avoid the drop is likely and Gangwon FC and Suwon FC, who avoided relegation via the play-offs last season, will be hoping to finish higher than last term. The same is true for Jeju United who have brought in veteran boss Kim Hak-bum, a K-League winner back in 2006 with Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma and then a gold medallist with South Korea's U23s at the 2018 Asian Games.

Chasing pack...Pohang Steelers finished second in 2023

Republic of Ireland

SEAN CREEDON

Shamrock Rovers chasing LOI history

The Dublin-based club can become the first-ever team to win five League of Ireland titles in a row

Shamrock Rovers were not one of the eight founding members of the League of Ireland in 1921-22, when St James' Gate were the inaugural winners. But a year later, the Hoops won the league in their first season of membership and in the 100 or so years since then have become the Republic of Ireland's most successful club.

Last season, Rovers won four-in-a-row for the second time in their history (having also done so in the 1980s), but it was the first time the feat was achieved by just one manager, Stephen Bradley. It was Rovers' 21st League of Ireland win, moving them seven clear of the next best side, Dundalk. Rovers have also won the FAI Cup a record 25 times, more than double their nearest rivals, also Dundalk.

Rovers' dominance is reflected in the crowds that they attract. "When I came in 2016, our average attendance was 1,300 and our average last season was nearly 7,000," says Bradley, although attendances across the league are on the up. Last year saw an overall rise of 20 per cent, taking the league's average attendance beyond pre-pandemic levels, with Rovers' Tallaght Stadium the best-attended ground for a fifth consecutive year. It is a trend that looks set to continue, as the manager adds: "Our new stand will definitely be ready for kick-off and we hope to be able to fill the new capacity of just under 11,000."

While Rovers have the history and the fanbase, Bradley can claim much of the credit for their recent success. When he became Rovers manager in November 2016, they had won two titles in the previous 22 years; now, they are bidding to become the first club in the history of the league to win five in a row.

"It's going to be difficult, and we will have to start much better than we did last season," says Bradley, whose side trailed top spot by ten points at one stage of the 2023 campaign. "The performances and stats were very good, but we struggled to get points. We had to keep strong and focused."

Rovers manager... Stephen Bradley

Rovers' league improvement was also aided by their failure in other competitions. The Irish champions were dumped out at the first stages of the FAI Cup, Champions League qualifiers and Conference League qualifiers within the space of just a few summer weeks – disappointments that Bradley is determined to rectify. With no distractions, however, they then remained unbeaten for the rest of the league season to claim top spot, seven and ten points ahead of Derry City and St Patrick's Athletic respectively.

Bradley expects those two to be Rovers' main rivals again this season, particularly St Pat's who finished last season on a high by winning the FAI Cup. Since then, the Saints have sold two young players to English Football League clubs (Adam Murphy to Bristol City and Jay McGrath to Doncaster Rovers), as the league continues to send talent across the Irish Sea and beyond.

The joint-top scorers in last year's league with 15 goals each, Jack Moylan and Jonathan Afolabi left Shelbourne and Bohemians respectively, with the former joining English League One side Lincoln City and the latter heading to Belgian outfit KV Kortrijk. Elsewhere, Ronan Coughlan, who hit a record 35 First Division goals for newly-promoted Waterford last season, has joined the Blues' sister club Fleetwood Town.

Of course, not every player that leaves is a success. Darragh Burns was signed by MK Dons after impressing for St Pat's in 2022, but failed to impress as the Dons were relegated from League One last season and has not figured in League Two in 2023-24.

Preview

ABOVE: Ireland's dominant club... Shamrock Rovers players during last season's campaign

Returning to Ireland... Darragh Burns

Described by Bradley as "an exciting winger" that he tried to sign two years ago, Burns will spend the season on loan at Shamrock Rovers.

With Republic of Ireland international Jack Byrne also returning to the first team following surgery last season, Rovers' squad is the envy of the rest of the league – even without club stalwart Ronan Finn, who played a key role in all of the last four league titles but has left to join UCD in the second tier.

> "We have been at the top for a long time now and all the other clubs will be trying to beat us"
>
> Shamrock Rovers manager Stephen Bradley

"Many managers work in the game a long time and don't have many trophies," says Bradley. "We have been at the top for a long time now and all the other clubs will be trying to beat us, which is only natural."

The League will finish on November 1, a couple of weeks before Bradley's 40th birthday, and sealing a fifth title in a row for the Hoops would be an ideal birthday present for the former Arsenal apprentice.

"It would be a brilliant achievement, but it will take a lot of hard work," he says. "I think we can do it."

St Helena

STEVE MENARY

Reconnecting with the world

St Helena's ability to engage with the rest of the sporting world has improved, but major challenges still lie ahead

Island Games... St Helena's team in Guernsey

Before 2016, the South Atlantic island of St Helena's only connection to the outside world was a mail boat stopping off between Britain and South Africa. That was until a new £285 million airport was built, which opened up new possibilities for sport on the island: sending teams overseas became easier, although at a cost of between £50,000 and £60,000 for the footballers. Unlike St Helena's cricketers, who are successful against African countries, the football team remains winless.

After losing all three matches on their overseas debut at the 2019 Inter Island Games in north Wales, the SHFA fundraised again to send a team to the 2023 Island Games in Guernsey.

"There is no funding from other organisations, such as the FA or FIFA," says Sam Collins, St Helena's centre-back in Guernsey. "Funding is the biggest barrier to sending a team abroad, as well as how remote the island is. There is one flight a week to South Africa and it took three days each way to travel to Guernsey. For the one-week tournament there, the players needed to be away from home for three weeks."

The draw in Group D was tough but the team improved after a 5-0 opening loss to Menorca. Their second opponents, Gozo, had a number of players with U21 caps for Malta but St Helena put in a good showing, losing 3-0, before falling 5-0 to eventual champions Jersey.

> "There is one flight a week to South Africa and it took three days each way to travel to Guernsey"
>
> Sam Collins, St Helena centre-back

In the classification match with Froya, Shane Stroud put St Helena ahead but the Norwegian island triumphed 4-2. The island's players returned home to a domestic league that kicked off in July with just six teams.

"This is the smallest league in the SHFA's history. In previous generations there were two divisions of ten teams," adds Collins. "The decline is a reflection of a shrinking and ageing population. Unfortunately a lot of younger people leave the island for economic reasons, mainly to Ascension Island, Falklands or the UK."

In 2022, just 26 births were registered on St Helena against 80 deaths, and the previous year two clubs, Wirebirds and Lakers, folded. Two new sides, Bellboys and Chop Shop, emerged with the former winning the 2022 league and cup. A district competition based on where players live is also staged with Half Tree Hollow beating Jamestown, Longwood and St Paul's to last season's title.

Two junior competitions also run but the island only has one field, St Francis Plain, which is shared with the cricketers and the island's destructive rabbit population.

"No-one wants to give it up because of the history, but what they really want is 5G pitches for the kids to train on," says Gary Davies, a former captain of England's cerebral palsy side and UEFA B licence holder, who worked as the island's head of customs and immigration and coached St Helena in Guernsey.

The SHFA, whose new chairman Mike E. Williams partnered Collins at the heart of St Helena's defence in Guernsey, would benefit from outside help like the cricketers, who joined the International Cricket Council as an affiliate in 2001.

In 2018, the SHFA contacted FIFA, whose then-secretary general Fatma Samoura replied that all new members must be recognised as countries by the United Nations and members of a regional confederation.

The solution was seeking recognition from CAF (the Confederation of African Football), which was the cricketers' route, but after a change of leadership the SHFA has not so far pursued that route.

Manager... Gary Davies led the team in Guernsey

FEBRUARY 16-MARCH 16

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

Mid-season splits

As the business end of the European season approaches, it's time for some leagues across the continent to divide into the championship and relegation rounds. The final matchdays of the Greek, Slovakian and Romanian regular seasons take place on the first weekend of March, with Austria a week later, and Belgium and Denmark the week after that. The Czech, Scottish, Serbian, Bulgarian and Swiss leagues don't split until April. Elsewhere, the Russian Premier League resumes after its almost three-month winter break at the start of March.

Mid-season split...Union Saint-Gilloise lead the way in Belgium

AFC & CAF Champions Leagues

In its first season with a new-look format, running from September to May like its European equivalent, the Asian Champions League is racing towards crunch time. The last-16 ties conclude on February 21, with the quarter-finals taking place across the first two weeks of March. We'll preview the semi-finals – the last round where the eastern and western zones are divided – in our May issue. Before that, in the April edition of *World Soccer*, we'll look ahead to the quarter-finals of the African Champions League, after its group stage concludes on March 2.

CONCACAF Champions Cup

After the first round concludes at the end of February and the 27 teams are whittled down to the last 16, the road to the new-look CONCACAF Champions Cup final will be clearer. Lionel Messi will make his competition bow when Inter Miami face either Nashville SC or Moca of the Dominican Republic, while MLS champions Columbus Crew are waiting for the winners of Houston Dynamo and St Louis City.

South American club action

The CONMEBOL Recopa, South America's equivalent of the UEFA Super Cup, takes place over two legs (February 22 and 29), with Libertadores champions Fluminense facing Sudamericana winners LDU Quito. The 2024 Copa Sudamericana then kicks off on March 5 in the form of single-leg qualifiers, with 32 teams playing off to reach the group stage, which begins in April. The Libertadores group stage begins the same week, with two-legged play-offs taking place on March 5-7 and 12-14.

Up for grabs...the CONMEBOL Recopa trophy

5 unmissable matches

- **Inter Miami v Real Salt Lake, February 21**
  The curtain-raiser for the 2024 Major League Soccer season could see Luis Suarez and Lionel Messi play a league game together for the first time since Barcelona's visit to Alaves in July 2020.
- **Bodo/Glimt v Ajax, February 22**
  It would be tempting to describe this Europa Conference League clash as a potential upset but, given Ajax's poor form in 2023-24, it would be no surprise if the Norwegian champions triumphed.
- **Bayern Munich v RB Leipzig, February 24**
  Whatever the result, these two tend to produce entertaining encounters. Since the start of the 2020-21 campaign, the German rivals have averaged more than four goals a game in their meetings.

Goal fest...RB Leipzig and Bayern Munich drew 2-2 at the Red Bull Arena back in September

- **Athletic Club v Barcelona, March 2**
  After losing to Barca in late October, Athletic went on a long unbeaten run that took them into the top four and above the Catalans. Champions League qualification may well be at stake here.
- **Liverpool v Manchester City, March 9**
  An important chapter in the story of this season's Premier League title race may well be written here, as Manchester City visit Liverpool just one week after the Manchester derby at the Etihad.

OFC Champions League qualifying

The qualifiers for the 2024 edition of Oceania's top club competition take place from February 14 to March 16. The preliminaries consist of a group stage comprising Tupapa Maraerenga (Cook Islands), Veitongo (Tonga), Vaiala Tongan (American Samoa) and Vaivase-Tai (Samoa), with the winners progressing to the group stage proper – which begins in May – along with the national play-off winners from Fiji, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tahiti and Vanuatu.

Club Football

EUROPE

2023-24 SPANISH SUPER CUP

Semi-Finals

Jan 10 – Riyadh
Real Madrid 5 (Rudiger 20, Mendy 29, Carvajal 85, Joselu 116, Diaz 120+2)
Atletico Madrid 3 (Hermoso 6, Griezmann 37, Rudiger 78 og)
After Extra-Time
Real Madrid: Kepa – Carvajal, Rudiger, Nacho, Mendy (Camavinga 81); Valverde (Guler 112), Tchouameni (Diaz 82), Modric (Kroos 67); Bellingham; Rodrygo (Ceballos 105), Vinicius Junior (Joselu 105).
Atletico Madrid: Oblak – Savic, Gimenez, Hermoso; Llorente (Azpilicueta 105), De Paul (Witsel 90), Koke (Galan 104), Saul (Molina 67), Lino (Riquelme 67); Morata (Correa 90), Griezmann.

Jan 11 – Riyadh
Barcelona 2 (Lewandowski 59, Yamal 90+3)
Osasuna 0
Barcelona: Pena – Kounde, Araujo, Christensen, Balde; Sergi Roberto (Pedri 61), Gundogan, De Jong; Raphinha (Yamal 42), Lewandowski, Torres (Joao Felix 61).
Osasuna: Herrera – Areso, D. Garcia, Catena, Cruz (Barja 85), Pena (Mojica 78); Oroz, Munoz (Moncayola 70), Gomez (Ruben Garcia 85); Budimir, Arnaiz (Raul Garcia 70).

Final

Jan 14 – Riyadh
Real Madrid 4 (Vinicius Junior 7, 10, 39 pen, Rodrygo 64)
Barcelona 1 (Lewandowski 33)
Real Madrid: Lunin – Carvajal, Rudiger, Nacho, Mendy; Valverde (Ceballos 86), Tchouameni, Kroos (Modric 81); Bellingham (Joselu 86); Rodrygo (Diaz 77), Vinicius Junior (Camavinga 82).
Barcelona: Pena – Araujo, Kounde, Christensen, Balde; Gundogan, De Jong; Torres (Joao Felix 61), Pedri (Yamal 61), Sergi Roberto (Lopez 61); Lewandowski.
Sent off: Araujo 71.

2023 ITALIAN SUPER CUP

Semi-Finals

Jan 18 – Riyadh
Napoli 3 (Simeone 22, Zerbin 84, 86)
Fiorentina 0
Napoli: Gollini – Di Lorenzo, Rrahmani, Juan Jesus; Mazzocchi (Zerbin 81), Cajuste (Gaetano 77), Lobotka, Mario Rui (Ostigard 72); Politano (Lindstrom 72), Kvaratskhelia (Zielinski 72); Simeone.
Fiorentina: Terracciano – Kayode, Milenkovic, Martinez Quarta (Barak 88), Biraghi (Parisi 67); Arthur, Duncan; Ikone (Nzola 57), Bonaventura (Faraoni 88), Brekalo (Sottil 57); Beltran.

Jan 19 – Riyadh
Internazionale 3 (Thuram 17, Calhanoglu 50 pen, Frattesi 87)
Lazio 0
Internazionale: Sommer – Pavard, Acerbi, Bastoni (De Vrij 66); Darmian, Barella (Frattesi 66), Calhanoglu (Asllani 81), Mkhitaryan, Dimarco; Thuram (Sanchez 74), Martinez (Arnautovic 74).
Lazio: Provedel – Lazzari (Hysaj 83), Mario Gila, Romagnoli, Marusic (Pellegrini 66); Guendouzi (Luis Alberto 50), Rovella (Cataldi 50), Vecino; Felipe Anderson, Immobile, Pedro (Isaksen 66).

Final

Jan 22 – Riyadh
Napoli 0
Internazionale 1 (Martinez 90+1)
Napoli: Gollini – Di Lorenzo, Rrahmani, Juan Jesus; Zerbin (Ostigard 58), Lobotka, Cajuste (Mario Rui 74), Mazzocchi (Raspadori 78); Politano (Lindstrom 70), Kvaratskhelia (Gaetano 70); Simeone.
Sent off: Simeone 60.
Internazionale: Sommer – Pavard, De Vrij (Carlos Augusto 62), Acerbi; Darmian, Barella (Frattesi 63), Calhanoglu, Mkhitaryan, Dimarco (Arnautovic 81); Thuram (Sanchez 81), Martinez (Bisseck 90+3).

2023 FRENCH SUPER CUP

Jan 3 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain 2 (Lee Kang-in 3, Mbappe 44)
Toulouse 0
Paris Saint-Germain: Donnarumma – Hakimi, Marquinhos, Skriniar (Beraldo 71), Hernandez; Zaire-Emery, Vitinha, Lee Kang-in; Dembele (Asensio 69), Mbappe, Barcola (Kolo-Muani 66).
Toulouse: Restes – Mawissa (Kamanzi 76), Diarra, Nicolaisen, Suazo; Spierings, Casseres; Donnum (Magri 66), Gelabert (Skytta 65), Sierro (Cissoko 76); Dallinga.

2023-24 PORTUGUESE LEAGUE CUP

Final

Jan 27 – Leiria
Braga 1 (Horta 20)
Estoril 1 (Cassiano 6 pen)
Braga win 5-4 on penalties
Braga: Matheus – Gomez (Mendes 76), Fonte (Saatci 77), Oliveira, Borja; Moutinho, Carvalho (Al Musrati 68); Djalo (Roger 56), Zalazar (Pizzi 67), Horta; Ruiz.
Estoril: Figueira – Pina, Alvaro (Feltes 63), Vital, Mangala, Araujo; Guitane (Tavares 85), Koindredi (Holsgrove 59), Fernandes, J. Marques; Cassiano (A. Marques 60).

SOUTH AMERICA

2023 ARGENTINE CHAMPIONS TROPHY

Dec 22 – Santiago del Estero
Rosario Central 0
River Plate 2 (Colidio 40, Fernandez 75)
Rosario Central: Broun – Komar, Mallo, Quintana, Sandez; Ortiz, Toledo (O'Connor 46); Lovera (Giaccone 75), Malcorra, Campaz; Martinez Dupuy (Bianchi 75).
Sent off: Campaz 60.
River Plate: Armani – Boselli, P. Diaz (Lanzini 84), Funes Mori (Gonzalez 67), E. Diaz; De la Cruz, Perez (Maidana 85), Barco; Echeverri (Fernandez 62); Solari (Borja 62), Colidio.

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Qualifying Rounds

First Stage

Feb 6-8:
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) v Defensor Sporting (Uru); Aurora (Bol) v Melgar (Per); Aucas (Ecu) v Nacional (Par)
Feb 13-15:
Defensor Sporting (Uru) v Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven); Melgar (Per) v Aurora (Bol); Nacional (Par) v Aucas (Ecu)

Second Stage

Feb 20-22:
Aguilas Doradas (Col) v Red Bull Bragantino (Bra); Always Ready (Bol) v Sporting Cristal (Per); Portuguesa (Ven) v Palestino (Chi); Aucas (Ecu)/Nacional (Par) v Atletico Nacional (Col); Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven)/Defensor Sporting (Uru) v Nacional (Uru); Aurora (Bol)/Melgar (Per) v Botafogo (Bra); Godoy Cruz (Arg) v Colo-Colo (Chi); Sportivo Trinidense (Par) v El Nacional (Ecu)
Feb 27-29:
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) v Aguilas Doradas (Col); Sporting Cristal (Per) v Always Ready (Bol); Palestino (Chi) v Portuguesa (Ven); Atletico Nacional (Col) v Aucas (Ecu)/Nacional (Par); Nacional (Uru) v Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven)/Defensor Sporting (Uru); Botafogo (Bra) v Aurora (Bol)/Melgar (Per); Colo-Colo (Chi) v Godoy Cruz (Arg); El Nacional (Ecu) v Sportivo Trinidense (Par)

CONCACAF

ARUBA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dakota*	9	7	2	0	26	9	23
Britannia*	9	6	3	0	24	3	21
River Plate*	9	4	3	2	21	9	15
RCA*	8	4	3	1	16	8	15
Nacional*	8	4	1	3	15	15	13
Estrella*	8	4	0	4	20	23	12
Bubali	9	3	1	5	12	25	10
La Fama	8	2	1	5	10	11	7
Santa Fe	9	1	0	8	7	31	3
Caiquetio	9	0	2	7	5	22	2

**Advance to the Kaya play-offs*

TURKS & CAICOS

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Academy Eagles*	8	8	0	0	25	6	24
SWA Sharks	8	6	0	2	24	11	18
Teachers	8	2	0	6	8	15	6
Flamingo	8	2	0	6	12	22	6
Cheshire Hall	8	2	0	6	5	20	6

**Advance to the championship play-off*

ASIA

2023-24 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

West Zone

Last 16

Feb 12-14:
Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb) v Al Ain (UAE); Al Fayha (KSA) v Al Nassr (KSA); Sepahan (Irn) v Al Hilal (KSA); Navbahor (Uzb) v Al Ittihad (KSA)
Feb 19-21:
Al Ain (UAE) v Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb); Al Nassr (KSA) v Al Fayha (KSA); Al Hilal (KSA) v Sepahan (Irn); Al Ittihad (KSA) v Navbahor (Uzb)

Quarter-Finals

Mar 4-6:
Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb)/Al Ain (UAE) v Al Fayha (KSA)/Al Nassr (KSA); Sepahan (Irn)/Al Hilal (KSA) v Navbahor (Uzb)/Al Ittihad (KSA)
Mar 11-13:
Al Ain (UAE)/Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb) v Al Nassr (KSA)/Al Fayha (KSA); Al Hilal (KSA)/Sepahan (Irn) v Al Ittihad (KSA)/Navbahor (Uzb)

East Zone

Last 16

Feb 12-14:
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) v Pohang Steelers (Kor); Ulsan HD (Kor) v Ventforet Kofu (Jpn); Shandong Taishan (Chn) v Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn); Bangkok United (Tha) v Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn)
Feb 19-21:
Pohang Steelers (Kor) v Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor); Ventforet Kofu (Jpn) v Ulsan HD (Kor); Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) v Shandong Taishan (Chn); Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) v Bangkok United (Tha)

Quarter-Finals

Mar 4-6:
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor)/Pohang Steelers (Kor) v Ulsan HD (Kor)/Ventforet Kofu (Jpn); Shandong Taishan (Chn)/Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) v Bangkok United (Tha)/Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn)
Mar 11-13:
Pohang Steelers (Kor)/Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) v Ventforet Kofu (Jpn)/Ulsan HD (Kor); Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn)/Shandong Taishan (Chn) v Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn)/Bangkok United (Tha)

2023-24 AFC CUP

West Zone

Zonal Semi-Finals

Feb 12-13:
Al Riffa (Bhr) v Al Nahda (Oma); Al Ahed (Lbn) v Al Kahrabaa (Irq)
Feb 19-20:
Al Nahda (Oma) v Al Riffa (Bhr); Al Kahrabaa (Irq) v Al Ahed (Lbn)

Winners advance to the West Asia Zone final

Zonal Final

Apr 16 & 23:
Al Riffa (Bhr)/Al Nahda (Oma) v Al Ahed (Lbn)/Al Kahrabaa (Irq)

Winners of the two-legged West Asia Zone final advance to the 2023-24 AFC Cup final against the inter-zone play-off final winners

ASEAN Zone

Zonal Semi-Finals

Feb 13:
Macarthur (Aus) v Sabah (Mas); Central Coast Mariners (Aus) v Phnom Penh Crown (Cam)

Winners advance to the ASEAN Zone final

Zonal Final

Feb 22:
Macarthur (Aus)/Sabah (Mas) v Central Coast Mariners (Aus)/Phnom Penh Crown (Cam)

Winners of the ASEAN Zone final advance to the inter-zone play-off semi-finals

Inter-Zone

Play-Off Semi-Finals

Mar 6:
Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz) v Taichung Futuro (Tpe)
Mar 13:
Taichung Futuro (Tpe) v Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz)

Winners of the Central Asia Zone-East Asia Zone semi-final advance to the inter-zone play-off final

Mar 7:
ASEAN Zone Winners v Odisha (Ind)

Mar 14:
Odisha (Ind) v ASEAN Zone Winners

Winners of the ASEAN Zone-South Asia Zone semi-final advance to the inter-zone play-off final

Play-Off Final

Apr 17 & 24:
Central Asia Zone/East Asia Zone winners v ASEAN Zone/South Asia Zone winners

Winners of the inter-zone play-off final advance to the 2023-24 AFC Cup final against the West Asia Zone final winners

AFRICA

BENIN

Regular Season Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Damissa	16	9	5	2	25	8	32
Bani Ganse	16	8	6	2	22	10	30
Cavaliers	16	6	6	4	15	8	24
Takunnin	16	6	6	4	16	16	24
Buffles	16	5	7	4	14	10	22
Dynamique Djougou	16	3	7	6	8	15	16
Pantheres	16	3	6	7	9	17	15
Dynamo Parakou	16	1	10	5	7	20	13
Beke Bembereke	16	2	5	9	13	25	11

Regular Season Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dadje	16	11	2	3	29	15	35
Loto Popo	16	9	4	3	28	16	31
Dynamo Abomey	16	9	3	4	17	14	30
Espoir Savalou	16	8	2	6	15	11	26
Tonnerre	16	6	4	6	15	18	22
Abeilles	16	5	6	5	16	17	21
Soleil	16	3	5	8	13	22	14
Hodio	16	2	5	9	10	19	11
Real Sport	16	1	5	10	8	19	8

Regular Season Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Coton Sport Ouidah	16	10	3	3	26	12	33
AS Cotonou	16	8	6	2	17	10	30
ASPAC	16	9	3	4	20	15	30
Requins	16	8	5	3	18	10	29
Adjidja	16	7	0	9	18	16	21
Etoile Filante	16	5	3	8	11	19	18
Police	16	4	3	9	15	24	15
Ainonvi	16	2	7	7	8	17	13
Aziza	16	2	4	10	11	21	10

Regular Season Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ayema	16	9	5	2	14	7	32
Sobemap	16	8	4	4	17	11	28
Dragons	16	7	6	3	21	9	27
JSP	16	8	3	5	19	14	27
ASVO	16	5	7	4	13	12	22
JAK	16	5	6	5	21	25	21
JSO	16	3	7	6	14	16	16
Avrankou Omnisport	16	3	5	8	15	22	14
Djeffa	16	1	3	12	10	28	6

The top four teams from each group advance to the championship round, the bottom five teams from each group enter the relegation round

OCEANIA

TAHITI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tefana	11	9	1	1	56	9	39
Pirae	11	8	1	2	43	10	36
Venus	11	7	3	1	46	14	35
Central	11	6	3	2	49	18	32
Dragon*	11	6	2	3	46	24	30
Punaruu	11	6	1	4	25	17	30
Pueu	11	5	0	6	31	32	26
Taiarapu	11	4	1	6	25	31	24
Temanava	11	4	1	6	26	36	24
Jeunes Tahitiens	11	3	0	8	28	48	20
Papenoo	11	0	2	9	11	90	13
Olympic Mahina*	11	0	1	10	7	64	11

Win = 4 points, Draw = 2 points, Loss = 1 point
**Deducted 1 point*

The top six teams enter the championship round, the bottom six teams enter the relegation round

Internationals

FRIENDLIES

Jan 1 – Tokyo
Japan 5 (Tanaka 50, Nakamura 72, Dolah 74 og, Kawamura 82, Minamino 90+1)
Thailand 0

Jan 1 – Abu Dhabi
China 1 (Tan Long 9)
Hong Kong 2 (Liu Yang 51 og, Poon Pui Hin 59)

Jan 2 – Antalya
Indonesia 0
Libya 4 (Ekrawa 25, Al Khoja 58, Al Qulaib 89, Al Qajdar 90+2)

Jan 4 – Al Wakrah
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Buraikan 48)
Lebanon 0

Jan 4 – Abu Dhabi
Hong Kong 1 (Everton 33)
Tajikistan 2 (Soirov 25, Samiev 51)

Jan 5 – Antalya
Syria 1 (Hesar 71)
Kyrgyzstan 1 (Akmatov 48)

Jan 5 – Antalya
Indonesia 1 (Sayuri 6)
Libya 2 (Al Shremi 9, Ekrawa 20)

Jan 5 – Kish
Iran 2 (Taremi 42, Ebrahimi 71)
Burkina Faso 1 (M. Konate 17)

Jan 5 – Doha
Qatar 1 (Afif 11 pen)
Jordan 2 (Al Naimat 51, Olwan 58 pen)

Jan 6 – Dubai
DR Congo 0
Angola 0

Jan 6 – Johannesburg
Mozambique 2 (Mandava 27, Lau King 81 pen)
Lesotho 0

Jan 6 – Bamako
Mali 6 (Y. Niakate 6, L. Coulibaly 15, K. Doumbia 40, Dorgeles 68, 85, Sacko 75)
Guinea-Bissau 2 (Mam. Balde 37. C. Mane 42)

Jan 6 – Abu Dhabi
United Arab Emirates 0
Oman 1 (Fawaz 5)

Jan 6 – Abu Dhabi
Iraq 0
South Korea 1 (Lee Jae-sung 40)

Jan 6 – Abu Dhabi
Bahrain 0
Australia 2 (Benaddi 35 og, Duke 61)

Jan 6 – San-Pedro
Ivory Coast 5 (Diomande 18, Kessie 36, Bamba 38, Boga 48, Amani 84)
Sierra Leone 1 (Michael 86)

Jan 6 – Rades
Tunisia 0
Mauritania 0

Jan 7 – Doha
Palestine 0
Uzbekistan 1 (Abdikholikov 79)

Jan 7 – Cairo
Egypt 2 (Trezeguet 32, Manula 73 og)
Tanzania 0

Jan 8 – Johannesburg
Botswana 1 (Seakanyeng 39 pen)
Mozambique 1 (Amade 90+5)

Jan 8 – Abu Dhabi
Guinea 2 (Ag. Camara 15, F. Conte 65)
Nigeria 0

Jan 8 – Doha
Syria 2 (Sabbag 70, Hesar 74)
Malaysia 2 (Arif 39, Josue 78)

Jan 8 – Diamniadio
Senegal 1 (F. Mendy 90+9)
Niger 0

Jan 8 – Kumasi
Ghana 0
Namibia 0

Jan 9 – Doha
Japan 6 (Itakura 14, Nakamura 17, own goal 29, Minamino 43, Asano 71, Maeda 81)
Jordan 1 (Rateb 87)

Jan 9 – Jeddah
Zambia 1 (Daka 11)
Cameroon 1 (Yongwa 20)

Jan 9 – Doha
Kyrgyzstan 2 (Kojo 31, Akmatov 75)
Vietnam 1 (Truong Tien Anh 63)

Jan 9 – Jeddah
Indonesia 0
Iran 5 (Ghoddos 3, Cheshmi 24, Moghanlou 40, Ghayedi 72, 88)

Jan 9 – Lome
Burundi 0
Algeria 4 (Bounedjah 1, Mahrez 39, Slimani 87, Amoura 90+3)

Jan 9 – Al Wakrah
Saudi Arabia 0
Palestine 0

Jan 9 – Malabo
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Akapo 23)
Djibouti 1 (Akinbinu 71)

Jan 10 – Tunis
Tunisia 2 (Achouri 12, Msakni 53)
Cape Verde 0

Jan 10 – Dubai
DR Congo 1 (Mbemba 57)
Burkina Faso 2 (Toure 36, Konate 41)

Jan 10 – Pretoria
South Africa 0
Lesotho 0

Jan 10 – Al Wakrah
Saudi Arabia 2 (Ghareeb 21 pen, Al Sqoor 86)
Hong Kong 0

Jan 11 – San-Pedro
Morocco 3 (En-Nesyri 30, 55, Boufal 35)
Sierra Leone 1 (Komeh 10)

Jan 12 – Paphos
Sweden 2 (Nanasi 30, Thelin 53)
Estonia 1 (Palumets 19)

Jan 12 – Cairo
Kuwait 1 (Zayid 78)
Libya 3 (Al Khouja 20, 30, A. Saleh 90)

Jan 13 – Fort Lauderdale
Guatemala 0
Iceland 1 (Thorvaldsson 79)

Jan 17 – Fort Lauderdale
Honduras 0
Iceland 2 (Gudjohnsen 48 pen, Willumsson 58)

Jan 19 – Cairo
Kuwait 0
Uganda 2 (Ssekiganda 10, Kitata 85)

Jan 20 – San Antonio
United States 0
Slovenia 1 (Gradisar 26)

The full standings and results from the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations and Asian Cup tournaments will be included in World Soccer's April edition of Results, Tables, Fixtures, alongside our reviews of the tournaments and the final squad lists.

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Hannes Halldorsson

Iceland 1 Argentina 1

2018 World Cup group stage, Moscow

The former Iceland goalkeeper looks back on his proudest moment in football

Equaliser... Halldorsson celebrates Iceland's goal against Argentina

After making my debut for the national team, I set myself a target of reaching 50 caps and, incredibly, I got there by playing in the biggest game in Iceland's history.

We'd never been to the World Cup before and we were the smallest country to ever qualify. Facing a giant like Argentina made the experience even more special. The World Cup is the biggest stage for any footballer and this game changed my life. It's defined me, and my career, ever since. Regardless of everything else I've done, I'll always be known as the guy who saved a penalty from Lionel Messi!

We wanted to make ourselves, and the people of Iceland, proud. We had a really good team and knew that we could give anybody a game after reaching the quarter-finals of the Euros two years earlier. But we also knew that, if we weren't at our best, we could get crushed. Argentina's front line was terrifying, so that risk of humiliation was always in the back of our minds.

In one of the pre-match meetings, we were shown a montage of Messi and the unbelievable pressure on his shoulders. Constantly being compared to Diego Maradona and expected to win Argentina the World Cup. It reminded us that he was nervous too and needed to deliver. That gave us some clarity.

We had really good coaches who gave us the right tactics and preparation. It played out almost perfectly. We kept Argentina in front of us as much as we could. Our players worked so hard and communicated well. They were doubling up on Messi, which left someone else free. It helped that the warm weather had dried up the pitch and slowed the ball down.

Sergio Aguero gave them the lead after 19 minutes, smashing the ball into the top corner with a really good finish. It needed to be; this was one of the best games I played for the national team. Our defence was great, especially our centre-backs Kari Arnason and Ragnar Sigurdsson. They were like twins with a special bond, both big, strong, crazy guys with such fighting spirit. But if Argentina got past them, I was there.

We managed to equalise quickly through Alfred Finnbogason, which gave us hope and made Argentina feel uneasy. Like against England at the Euros, their relief at getting the first goal was short-lived. We hit back to remind them that it wasn't going to be an easy day.

In the second half, Argentina got a penalty. Seeing Messi put the ball down on the spot, step back and face me was surreal. I knew the eyes of the world were watching us. This had the potential to be one of the most significant moments of my life and I was determined to grab it. I didn't feel any nerves.

Iceland's hero... Messi watches as his penalty is saved by Halldorsson

I'd analysed Messi's penalties leading up to the game, so I was quite confident in my choice. He'd put his last one in that same spot. I don't know if it made any difference, but I tried to distract him by clapping my hands and shouting just before he kicked the ball. I dived, full stretch, to my right to push his shot away.

I couldn't believe it. After the ball was cleared, I said to myself out loud, 'Did that just happen?' I'd saved a penalty from perhaps the greatest player of all time in the biggest game of my career – an amazing, magical moment. I was determined to finish the job and make sure it counted for something. Late on, I reacted well to keep out a low cross that curled all the way through to the far post.

I felt euphoric when the final whistle went, like we'd won a major trophy. I was named man of the match and I had so many messages that my phone almost melted! It took me a few days to come back down to earth. That save was written and talked about all over the world and still remains a source of pride.

Interview by Sean Cole

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